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January 2024

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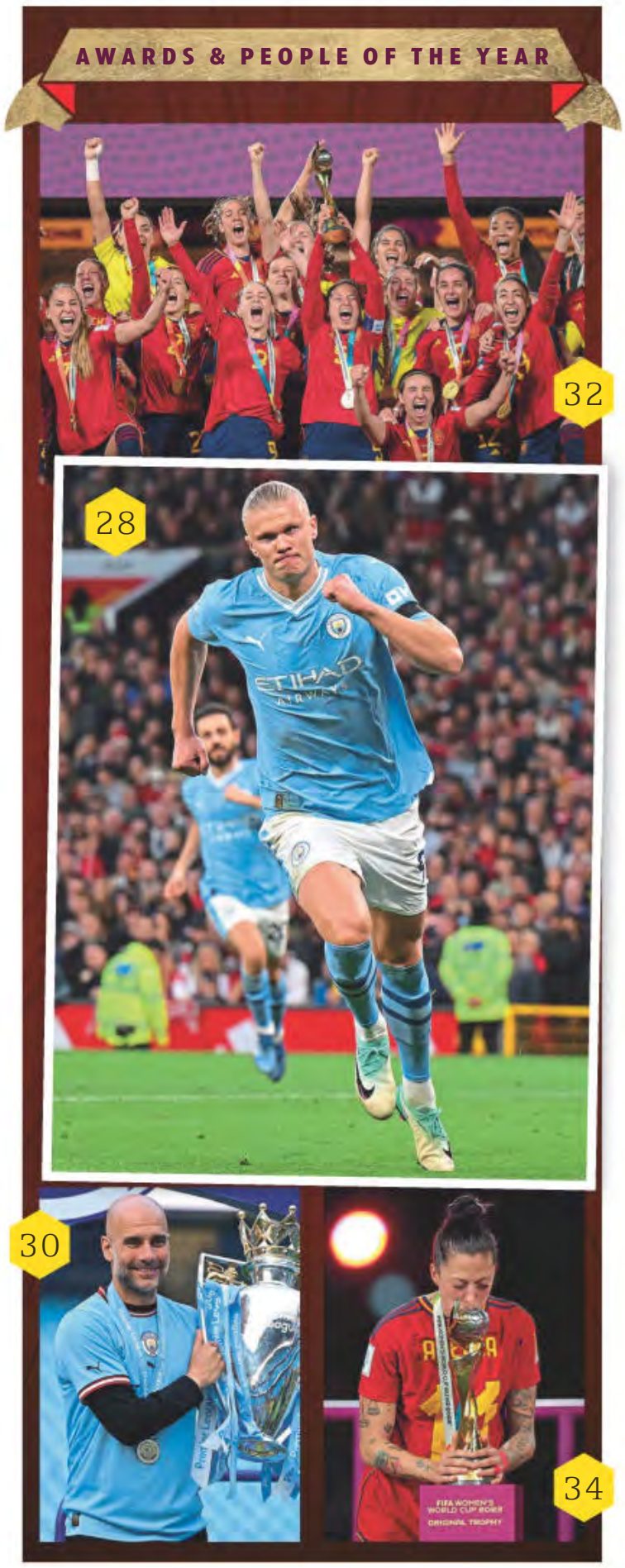

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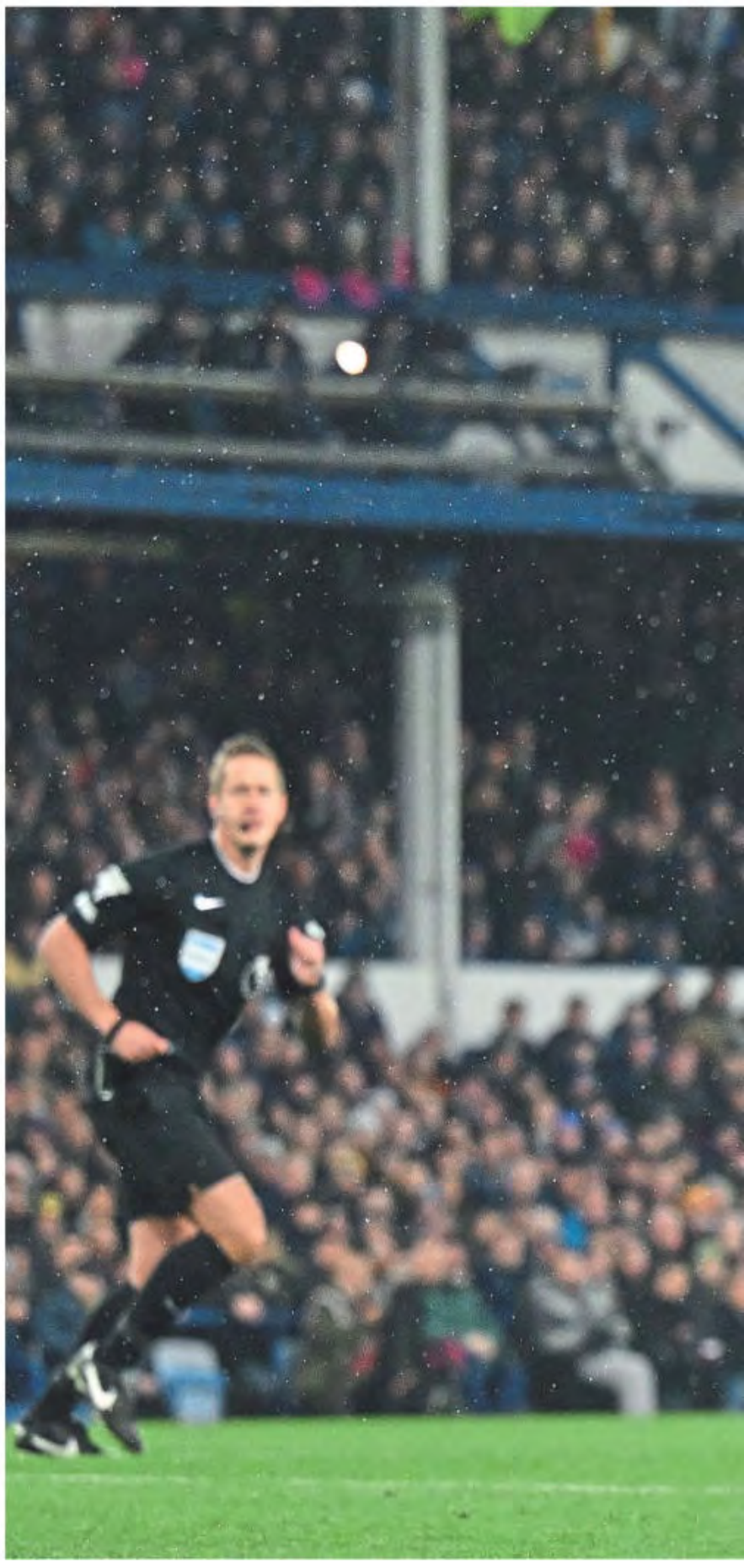
The global game caught on camera

Germany...pyrotechnics inside the Millerntor Stadium during the Hamburg derby between rivals St Pauli and Hamburg

Brazil...a young Gremio supporter pays tribute to Luis Suarez during his final game for the club

Saudi Arabia...Cristiano Ronaldo urges the referee to overturn a penalty awarded for Al Nassr against Persepolis in the Asian Champions League

Hungary...the Magyars' captain Dominik Szoboszlai celebrates with his team's supporters after securing qualification for Euro 2024



Brazil...Argentina players attempt to intervene after crowd trouble breaks out in the Maracana during a crucial 2026 World Cup qualifier

Slovenia...Lille's Yusuf Yazici is involved in a goalmouth scramble in his team's Europa Conference League win v Olimpija Ljubljana

England...Alejandro Garnacho scores a breathtaking bicycle-kick for Manchester United at Goodison Park against Everton

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FROM THE EDITOR

As an impressionable young football fan in the mid-'90s, I have some wonderful memories of Terry Venables and his Euro '96 England team. After the Three Lions had failed to qualify for the 1994 World Cup, my first memory of watching England in major tournament action was at the 1996 European Championship, where "El Tel's" side captured the imagination of the public. The highs (thrashing the Netherlands 4-1) and lows (the agonising penalty-shootout defeat to Germany in the semi-finals), is basically football in a nutshell – from total euphoria to utter despair. The tournament left its mark on me, and I have Venables in part to thank for that.

In addition to paying tribute to Venables in this month's issue, we also remember the other members of the football family that we've lost over the past 12 months, as well as focusing on the people who've helped shape the game over the past year. Without giving too much away about the 2023 *World Soccer* Awards, you can expect to read plenty about Manchester City and Spain's Women's World Cup winners over the coming pages after their remarkable years.

You can expect to read plenty about Manchester City and Spain's Women's World Cup winners

In addition to looking back, we also look forward as we comprehensively preview – as always – the Africa Cup of Nations and Asian Cup tournaments. With 48 team profiles, key players to watch for every country, and interviews with Morocco coach Walid Regragui and India boss Igor Stimac, it's the only definitive guide you need ahead of the January kick-offs.

Elsewhere in the issue, we cover the four corners of the globe: from Euro 2024 qualification to South America's 2026 World Cup preliminaries; wrap-ups of the league seasons in South Korea, Japan and Norway; plus reviews of the NWSL and MLS play-offs in the United States. With the draws also complete for the Copa America and Euros, there is already eager anticipation for 2024.

Stephen Fishlock, Group Editor

UEFA

Euro 2024 draw

The 2024 European Championship will begin on June 14 at Bayern Munich's Allianz Arena with a clash between hosts Germany and Scotland.

After December's draw, much of the attention centred on Group B, where holders Italy – among the bottom-seeded teams – were drawn alongside Spain, Croatia and Albania, appearing at only their second-ever finals. Meanwhile in Group D, France and the Netherlands, opponents in both the qualifiers and the 2018-19 Nations League, were paired together once more.

The play-offs to decide the final three spots will take place in March.

GROUP A
- Germany
- Scotland
- Hungary
- Switzerland

GROUP B
- Spain
- Croatia
- Italy
- Albania

GROUP C
- Slovenia
- Denmark
- Serbia
- England

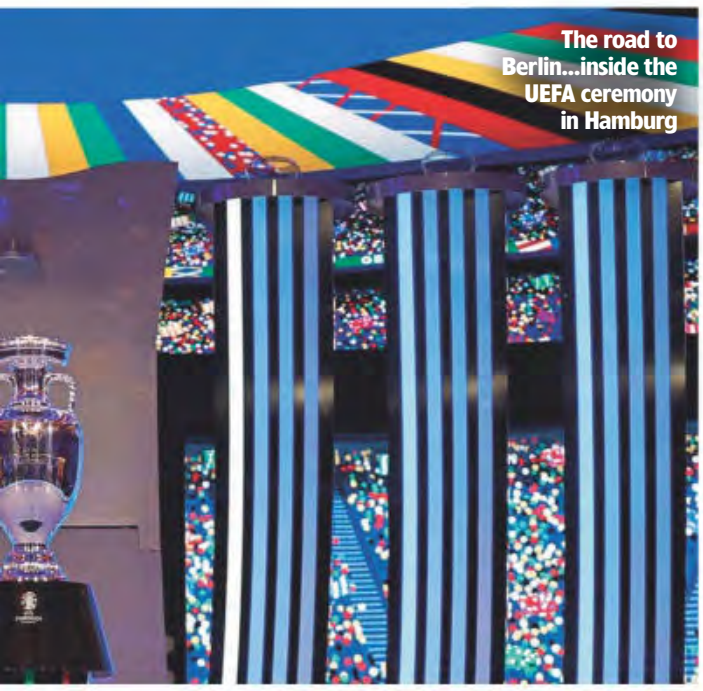
GROUP D
- Wales/Finland/Poland/Estonia
- Netherlands
- Austria
- France

GROUP E
- Belgium
- Slovakia
- Romania
- Bosnia-Herzegovina/Ukraine/Israel/Iceland

GROUP F
- Turkey
- Luxembourg/Georgia/Greece/Kazakhstan
- Portugal
- Czech Republic

"He gave us [Barcelona] La Liga after 11 years. His impact was incredible. He introduced something that had never been before"

Pep Guardiola pays tribute to Terry Venables after the death of the former Barcelona and England manager



The road to Berlin...inside the UEFA ceremony in Hamburg

CONMEBOL

United States ready for Copa America 2024

The draw for next summer's Copa America, which will be staged in the United States and include six CONCACAF nations, also took place in early December.

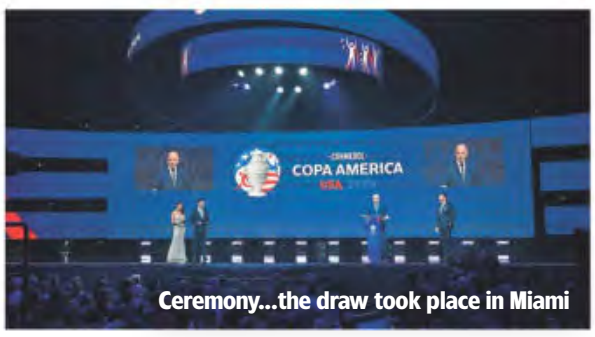
The tournament will commence in Atlanta with holders and 15-time winners Argentina taking on either Canada or Trinidad & Tobago, whose place, along with Costa Rica or Honduras, will be decided via play-offs in March.

GROUP A
- Argentina
- Peru
- Chile
- Canada/ Trinidad & Tobago

GROUP B
- Mexico
- Ecuador
- Venezuela
- Jamaica

GROUP C
- United States
- Uruguay
- Panama
- Bolivia

GROUP D
- Brazil
- Colombia
- Paraguay
- Costa Rica/Honduras



Ceremony...the draw took place in Miami

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football this month...

1
Brazil's defeat to Argentina at the Maracana was their first-ever home loss in a World Cup qualifier.

2
Senegal players with over 100 caps, after captain Sadio Mane reached the milestone in November, marking the occasion with two goals.

3
Consecutive matches San Marino have scored in – the best scoring streak in the country's history.

48
Matches that it took for Erling Haaland to score 50 Premier League goals. The Norwegian is the quickest player to reach the landmark, eclipsing the previous record set by Andy Cole of 65.

3
Players that have scored in all of Europe's top five leagues after Bournemouth forward Justin Kluivert joined former Romania striker Florin Raducioiu and Montenegro's Stevan Jovetic.

1
Samba Gold awards – presented to the best Brazilian player in Europe – won by Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior after he collected the 2023 prize.

£30m
Value of The Lionesses Futures Fund, which will provide new pitches and training facilities for women's football across England.

29
Years since Brazil had a younger debutant than Endrick. The Real Madrid-bound starlet became the *Selecao's* youngest player since Ronaldo in 1994 after his first senior call-up in November.

Samba starlet... 17-year-old Endrick on his Brazil debut

Mixed week... Sergio Ramos got a red card in La Liga and a goal in Europe

29
Career red cards for Sergio Ramos after he was sent off for Sevilla against Real Sociedad. Ironically, his team-mate Jesus Navas received his first career red for protesting the decision.

10,000
Just days after being sent off, Ramos was involved in a Champions League record, scoring the 10,000th goal in the competition's history.

18
Teams that will compete in the 2025-26 Women's Champions League after the competition's format was revised by UEFA.

£6.7bn
Value of the Premier League's next domestic TV rights deal with Sky Sports and TNT Sports. The deal will last from 2025 to 2029 and includes up to 270 live matches per season.

1
Players to score over 200 goals for Lazio after Ciro Immobile recently passed the landmark.

24
Years, ten months and 29 days – the age at which Kylian Mbappe hit his 300th career goal.

2
Players to reach 100 WSL goals and assists after Beth Mead joined her Arsenal team-mate Vivianne Miedema in passing the milestone.

81
Number of shots Brazil had against New Caledonia during their 9-0 victory in the Under-17 World Cup in Indonesia.

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

The great what ifs?

The late Terry Venables was a progressive, popular and influential coach – yet regrets still linger over his career

The dilemma in assessing the multi-faceted life and loquacious career of Terry Venables is deciding where to start. He was modern football's renaissance man, applying an ever-inventive broad brush to the canvas of his modern sporting life, with all of its attractions but all of its distractions.

The death of Venables at 80 generated a flood of tributes from the game in general and a notable cascade from his players in particular. Venables was a football man at heart and one can only speculate how far, how high and for how long he could have ruled the domain had his inquiring and inventive mind not sought to open so many other doors.

Easy enough knowing where to start: Dagenham, East London, home to the Ford motor plant and a wealth of optimistic young footballers. Venables knew the price of his ability at a young age. Hence favouring Chelsea rather than interest from Manchester United, Tottenham and local side West Ham United.

Venables grew up in the game at a time of tactical turbulence as inside forwards evolved into midfielders in the new-fangled 4-2-4. His speed was in his football brain rather than his legs. The role of midfield general suited his talent and temperament. Venables played for England at schoolboy level and then as an amateur; he delayed turning professional in the vain hope of playing at the 1960 Olympics.

Tommy Docherty swept in as Chelsea manager, energetic and sharp-tongued. Down in the Second Division he built a team of bright youngsters fired by the Chelsea sparkle of the Swinging Sixties. Venables celebrated promotion and League Cup success. Then he and seven team-mates broke curfew one night. Docherty sent them home and a league title pursuit was punctured. It was the first of many fall-outs that would mark Venables' career.

Venables passed his FA coaching badges in his 20s and took his own ideas onto the training ground and out on the pitch – all to Docherty's irritation. Along the way Venables played for England Under-23s and then twice for the seniors under Alf Ramsey. But Ramsey saw no future for Venables with England and neither did Docherty with Chelsea.

England were wrapping up their World Cup preparation in 1966 as Chelsea sold Venables to Tottenham. This could have been a marriage made in football heaven but the game does not work like that. Not for Venables and Spurs then or much later. They won the FA Cup in his first season – against Docherty's Chelsea, ironically – but White Hart Lane never took to him.

He dropped down into the Second Division with QPR, where he would often warm the team up and take training under manager Gordon Jago, then dropped down a further division to Crystal Palace. There, after just 14 matches and increasing trouble from an arthritic heel, his playing career came to an end. Manager Malcolm Allison was delighted to keep him as coach.

Not that playing had ever been the be-all and end-all. From his early

"El Tel"...Venables ahead of Euro '96

Who knows whether England, under Venables, would have fallen short at the 1998 World Cup?

days at Chelsea Venables had invested his time, money and growing celebrity status into all manner of business ventures. Most were short-lived. He also mined a rich seam in newspaper and magazine articles ghosted by Scottish journalist Gordon Williams. The plot for their futuristic novel *They Used to Play on Grass* proved remarkably prescient. Their private detective creation, *Hazell*, translated into a TV series.

Back at Crystal Palace, Allison, 18 months after employing Venables as a coach, was sacked. Venables took over. Everyone wanted his opinions on everything in the game and he proved as progressive as Jimmy Hill a decade earlier. The players drank in his creativity, while owners loved him – and then resented him. He spent four years at Palace and four years back at QPR, achieving promotions. Then, out of the blue, Barcelona came calling, trusting a recommendation from Bobby Robson.

The astonishing tale bears repetition: Barcelona sold Diego Maradona, filled the gap with Steve Archibald on Venables' advice, beat Real Madrid 3-0 away on his La Liga debut and won the club's first league crown in 11 years. The English media loved it as much as the Spanish. He became "El Tel", like it or not. But at the end of his second season Barcelona, ridiculously, were beaten on penalties by rank outsiders Steaua Bucharest in the European Cup final on home-from-home turf in Seville.

Venables lasted one more season plus three defeats and was gone. Back to manage Tottenham. They won the FA Cup in 1991, the crazy final against Brian Clough's Nottingham Forest in which Gary Lineker missed a penalty and Paul Gascoigne was carried off.

It was the beginning of the end. Spurs fans, looking back, may think that then-owner Irving Scholar loved the club too much and successor Alan Sugar loved the club not enough. Along the way, Venables' ownership aspirations crumbled in a financial and legal maelstrom. With hindsight, it was remarkable that the FA dared summon him to manage hosts England at Euro '96.

The clever set-pieces and the "Christmas tree" formation were important, but nothing mattered as much as the bond Venables constructed with his players.

The FA had always been suspicious of the "wide boy" reputation. They havered over offering Venables a contract renewal ahead of the finals, not having learned the lesson of Bobby Robson and Italia '90. Hence, English football paid the same price. Who knows whether England, under Venables, would have fallen short at the 1998 World Cup?

Instead, Euro '96 proved the pinnacle for Venables. He described the 4-1 group win over Netherlands as: "Perfection. My most thrilling experience in football." The semi-final shootout defeat by Germany proved to be the endgame, in more ways than one. The Venables star never shone as brightly again.

His mark on English football, though, remains significant to this day. Gareth Southgate, a key member of that squad but whose penalty miss cost England in the semi-final, was hugely influenced by Venables.

Influential...Venables delivers instructions to his future successor Gareth Southgate

"Tactically excellent, he had a wonderful manner, capable of handling everyone from the youngest player to the biggest star," said the current England manager. "He was open-minded, forward-thinking, enjoyed life to the full and created a brilliant environment with England that allowed his players to flourish and have one of the most memorable tournaments in England history. A brilliant man, who made people feel special."

Gary Neville, who played in the first of five England tournaments at Euro '96, said: "Without a shadow of doubt my number one England coach in my whole career. He was a players' man, looked after his players, stood up for his players in big situations.

"He also had an unbelievable ruthlessness and clinical side to him. We had brilliant leaders in that dressing room like Ince, Adams, Shearer, Platt, Gascoigne, Southgate and Seaman. They all knew who was the boss."

Gary Lineker, whom Venables signed for both Barcelona and Tottenham, agreed: "He was charming, charismatic, witty but also tough – and that's what you needed to be. He understood football – he had an incredible football brain."

In his latter years, Venables meandered to Australia, Palace again, Middlesbrough (alongside Bryan Robson) and Leeds United before a brief stint as England assistant in the doomed reign of Steve McClaren. And so to retirement back in Spain, where his death was honourably celebrated. "Goodbye, El Tel!" in the English media translated into: *"Adios, Mister!"* in Spain.

Venables left footballing memories of FA Cup wins as a player and manager plus a myriad of sideline ventures. Still, one question remains hanging, unanswered and unanswerable: consider those Barcelona and England penalty shootouts...what if?

BOOKS THIS MONTH

ECHOES OF AN ITALIAN SUMMER
By Paul Grech (Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

This book reveals the fascinating stories that underpin the magical Italia '90 World Cup, many told for the first time. Learn about the other Schillaci who could have played at the World Cup, the goalkeeper who went on to play in the NFL, the story behind the famous Germany kit, and how Italia '90 influenced football in such a profound way. *Echoes of an Italian Summer* is chock-full of nostalgia and previously untold tales.

GOLDEN GENERATIONS
By Michael Gallwey (Pitch Publishing, £25)

Golden Generations is the definitive story of the 2006 World Cup. From Philipp Lahm's extraordinary opening goal to Zinedine Zidane's infamous headbutt, it was a World Cup that had it all. The book explores the plots and subplots that defined the tournament's beginnings to the legacy it left behind, where every nation was seemingly in the middle, on the verge or at the end of a "Golden Generation" of players.

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Bellingham can be England's Jofra Archer

The midfielder has the potential to elevate Gareth Southgate's side to new heights at Euro 2024

For England, the build-up to these Euros has a slight whiff of the build-up to the 2019 cricket World Cup. Then too, after years of underperformance, of playing a tamer, less sophisticated game than the world's best, England had started to look like potential winners. And then too, just as optimism began to be kindled, they had been presented with an astonishing talent, one of an even higher level than an already gifted squad. For Jofra Archer then, read Jude Bellingham now.

Players of that quality represent great opportunities for national team managers, but also great challenges. They have only increased since Bellingham joined Real Madrid and started playing in a more advanced role, since when barely a week has gone by in which he hasn't scored a notable goal or transformed a game. He's no longer the elegant link player of Borussia Dortmund, somebody whose tactical intelligence meant he could be trusted to adjust his position according to the state of the game; sometimes dropping deep to protect the defence, sometimes pushing forward to support the attack, always with that sense of smoothness, of restrained power backed up by remarkable technical ability. He's become something more, a genuine game-changer who can transform games by scoring or creating goals from nowhere – as he did, for instance, as Madrid beat Barcelona earlier this season, or to drag England level after they'd gone behind at home to Italy in a Euro qualifier.

The temptation then is to build the team around him – something that is antithetical to modern notions of philosophies and systems. It worked with Argentina and Lionel Messi at the last World Cup, although that was largely because an entire nation had come together and decided that, at the last, it was essential everything was sacrificed to ensure Messi did win the tournament. There will not be many players as suited to the "bodyguard role" as Rodrigo De Paul. And besides, Bellingham is not – yet – Messi. Even Messi in previous World Cups was not that Messi, blessed with a remarkable capacity to fade out of games to the point of anonymity and then suddenly burst back into decisive significance. What worked, eventually, for perhaps the greatest of all time – and still entailed defeat to Saudi Arabia and two penalty shootouts – should not necessarily be regarded as a model for others to follow.

Given Madrid's squad, it makes sense from a football point of view for Bellingham to continue to operate as the most advanced midfielder. They have, in Eduardo Camavinga and Aurelien Tchouameni, two of the finest young deep-lying midfielders in the world. The pair of them plus Bellingham could be a world-beating midfield trident for a decade. Fede Valverde can then be added to the mix in the 4-3-1-2 shape Carlo Ancelotti tends to have preferred this season.

World Cup catalyst ...can Bellingham be England's Archer?

> Bellingham's become something more, a genuine game-changer who can transform games by scoring or creating goals from nowhere

Golden Boy award winner ...Bellingham

For Gareth Southgate the situation is slightly different because of the strength England have attacking from wide. If he were to build the team around Bellingham, creating a midfield platform with two runners ahead of him, that would probably mean no place in the side for any of Bukayo Saka, Phil Foden or Jack Grealish. Raheem Sterling could conceivably be recalled to operate alongside Harry Kane, or Cole Palmer or Anthony Gordon could perhaps take on that central role, but given the relative lack of options deeper in midfield and the depth of attacking options, it would seem a strange decision.

More likely is a 4-3-3/4-2-3-1 hybrid, with Bellingham pushed forward from midfield to get close to Kane, and two of Saka, Foden and Grealish wide. The problem then is who plays alongside Declan Rice deeper in midfield. It could be a holder or a shuttler, who would give Rice license. Or it could be a more creative figure, but that would restrict Rice's forward sallies. Ideally Southgate would probably prefer Kalvin Phillips, who has dovetailed well with Rice before and offers a range of passing at speed unequalled by any other England player. But the longer he goes without playing, and Pep Guardiola seems unconvinced by his value, the harder it is to see him starting in Germany. Which probably leaves Southgate hoping either Trent Alexander-Arnold or Rico Lewis can establish themselves in his midfield.

There is one other possibility, although it would simultaneously court criticism from those who believe Bellingham's role behind Kane should be sacrosanct while also defying Southgate's conservative image. And that would be to pull Bellingham deeper as a creator alongside Rice, with James Maddison, or possibly Foden, used as a number ten.

Perhaps that is an option for weaker sides who sit deep against England, or if England are chasing a goal late in a game. But the default will probably be more similar to how Bellingham plays for Madrid, just in a 4-2-3-1 rather than a 4-3-1-2. And perhaps, in that role, he could do for English football what Archer did for English cricket in 2019.

Samu OMORODION

(Alaves)

Atletico Madrid signed the 19-year-old striker in August, shortly after he had scored against them for newly-promoted Granada, then immediately sent him on loan to Alaves for the season.

A tall striker, Omorodion comes alive inside the penalty area, with all of his first five La Liga goals scored from inside the box – including one against Barcelona in November after just 17 seconds.

Born in Melilla – a Spanish city in North Africa – to Nigerian parents, he recently quashed any hopes of joining Nigeria's upcoming AFCON campaign, saying: "Spain has given me the opportunity and I am very grateful for it. I don't think about Nigeria. My goal is to debut with the senior side and have my career in Spain."

Warren ZAIRE-EMERY

(Paris Saint-Germain)

PSG's youngest-ever player and scorer is now the youngest France player and scorer since 1914, having struck on his debut v Gibraltar.

Chido OBI-MARTIN

(Arsenal)

The teenager, who is eligible for Denmark, Nigeria and England, smashed in ten goals for Arsenal's U16s in a 14-3 thrashing of Liverpool.

Kobbie MAINOO

(Manchester United)

In a rare positive for the Red Devils, the 18-year-old academy graduate shone in a holding midfield role on his Premier League debut in a 3-0 victory against Everton.

Francesco CAMARDA

(Milan)

The youngest player in Serie A history at 15 years and 260 days, Camarda made his Milan debut after impressing in the academy, scoring 483 goals in 87 games for their youth teams.

"I am forced to stop playing. I am a free agent now, but my physical shape is far from acceptable to return on the pitch. Now, I have time to understand which path I can take"

Sampdoria legend and former Italy striker Fabio Quagliarella announces his retirement

IN

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

32 Moves That Caught Our Eye This Month

OUT

EUROPE

JANNE ANDERSSON
After **Sweden** failed to qualify for the Euros for the first time since 1996, their manager stepped down after seven years in charge.

STEPHEN KENNY
Republic of Ireland opted not to renew the 52-year-old manager's contract after he failed to guide them to qualification for Euro 2024.

JAROSLAV SILHAVY
The **Czech Republic** manager stepped down from his role despite qualifying for Euro 2024.

GIANNI DE BIASI
The Italian coach departed from **Azerbaijan**.

PRIMOZ GLIHA
Kosovo are looking for a new manager after their temporary coach stepped down.

CHRIS WILDER
Sheffield United re-hired their former boss after the sacking of Paul Heckingbottom.

Back at Bramall Lane...Chris Wilder

NENAD BJELICA
Union Berlin hired the Croatian after the departure of legendary manager Urs Fischer.

FABIO GROSSO
Lyon sacked their manager after just seven matches in charge of the Ligue 1 strugglers.

ALEXANDER MEDINA
La Liga strugglers **Granada** fired Paco Lopez and replaced him with Medina, formerly the manager of Argentine side Velez Sarsfield.

PATRICK KLUIVERT
Turkish side **Adana Demirspor** parted ways with the Dutch coach after just 20 games.

MARCELINO
Seven years after he departed his first spell at the club, Marcelino re-joined **Villarreal** following the firing of head coach Pacheta.

WALTER MAZZARRI
Napoli re-appointed Mazzarri for his second spell in charge of the club after the brief tenure of French coach Rudi Garcia.

PHILLIP COCU
The former PSV, Fenerbahce and Derby County boss resigned as manager of **Vitesse Arnhem**.

CARLOS CARVALHAL
The Portuguese coach took charge of **Olympiakos**, replacing Diego Martinez.

MOHAMED IHATTAREN
The former PSV, Ajax and Juventus prodigy joined **Slavia Prague** as a free agent.

ANDRE AYEW
After leaving Nottingham Forest last summer, the Ghana forward joined Ligue 1 side **Le Havre**.

OUMAR NIASSE
A former Senegal international, who played in the Premier League for Everton, Hull and Cardiff, Niasse joined non-league **Macclesfield**.

YANNICK BOLASIE
Swansea City signed the DR Congo winger as a free agent after he left Turkish side Caykur Rizespor in the summer.

TANGUY COULIBALY
The Paris Saint-Germain academy graduate joined **Montpellier** as a free agent after being released by Stuttgart in the summer.

MAX KRUSE
The former Germany forward had his contract with **Paderborn** terminated by mutual consent.

PHIL JAGIELKA
The ex-Sheffield United, Everton and **England** defender hung up his boots at the age of 41 after more than 800 career appearances.

TONY MOWBRAY
Sunderland parted company with their manager after 15 months in charge.

CESC FABREGAS
The former Barcelona, Arsenal and Spain midfielder took his first managerial role as interim head coach of **Como**, the Serie B club that he ended his playing career with.

DES BUCKINGHAM
The former Mumbai City manager returned to England to take charge of **Oxford United**.

SOUTH AMERICA

EDUARDO BERIZZO
After only winning four out of 16 games, the Argentine resigned as manager of **Chile**.

FILIPE LUIS
The former Atletico Madrid, Chelsea and **Brazil** left-back announced his retirement.

LUIS SUAREZ
The Uruguay legend ended his time at Brazilian side **Gremio**, ahead of a reported reunion with former team-mate Lionel Messi at Inter Miami.

Fond farewell... Luis Suarez

ANGEL DI MARIA
The **Argentina** winger confirmed that he will end his international career after next summer's Copa America in the USA.

ASIA

CARLOS QUEIROZ
In a shock move, **Qatar** sacked their head coach on the eve of the 2023 Asian Cup.

RADJA NAINGGOLAN
After leaving Italian side SPAL last summer, the former Roma and Belgium midfielder joined Indonesian side **Bhayangkara**.

MARCELO GALLARDO
Al Ittihad hired the former River Plate boss to replace Nuno Espirito Santo.

MASATADA ISHII
After back-to-back league titles with Thai club Buriram United, the Japanese coach took charge of the **Thailand** national team.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Marcin Bulka (Nice)	6
Lukas Hradecky (Bayer Leverkusen)	6
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	5
Wojciech Szczesny (Juventus)	4
Alisson (Liverpool)	2
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Real Madrid)	1
Ederson (Manchester City)	1
Kamil Grabara (Copenhagen)	1
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	1
Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	1
Andre Onana (Manchester United)	1
Ivan Provedel (Lazio)	1
Marc-Andre ter Stegen (Barcelona)	1

DEFENDERS

Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	15
Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen)	7
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	6
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	6
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	5
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	5
Bremer (Juventus)	4
Cristian Romero (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Jean-Clair Todibo (Nice)	4
Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Francesco Acerbi (Internazionale)	3
Joao Cancelo (Barcelona)	3
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	3
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	3
Gabriel (Arsenal)	3
Odilon Kossounou (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	3
Ben White (Arsenal)	3
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	2
Ronald Araujo (Barcelona)	2
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	2
Dante (Nice)	2
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	2
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	2
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	2
Achraf Hakimi (Paris Saint-Germain)	2
Mario Hermoso (Atletico Madrid)	2
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Benjamin Pavard (Internazionale)	2
William Saliba (Arsenal)	2
Kieran Trippier (Newcastle United)	2
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	2
Axel Witsel (Atletico Madrid)	2
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	1
Andreas Christensen (Barcelona)	1
Yan Couto (Girona)	1
Oscar De Marcos (Athletic Club)	1
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	1
Piero Hincapie (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	1
Tino Livramento (Newcastle United)	1
Nahuel Molina (Atletico Madrid)	1
Nicolas Otamendi (Benfica)	1
David Raum (RB Leipzig)	1
Nico Schlotterbeck (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Filippo Terracciano (Verona)	1
Jordan Teze (PSV)	1
Fikayo Tomori (Milan)	1
Destiny Udogie (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Leny Yoro (Lille)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	28
James Maddison (Tottenham Hotspur)	9
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	6
Rodri (Manchester City)	4
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	3
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	3
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	3
Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Aleix Garcia (Girona)	2
Yangel Herrera (Girona)	2
Douglas Luiz (Aston Villa)	2
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Internazionale)	2
Adrien Rabiot (Juventus)	2
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	2
Thomas Delaney (Anderlecht)	1
Rasmus Falk (Copenhagen)	1
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	1
Chris Fuhrich (Stuttgart)	1
Gavi (Barcelona)	1
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	1
Teun Koopmeiners (Atalanta)	1
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	1
Takefusa Kubo (Real Sociedad)	1
Ivan Martin (Girona)	1
Weston McKennie (Juventus)	1
Scott McTominay (Manchester United)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1
Tijjani Reijnders (Milan)	1
Rodrigo Riquelme (Atletico Madrid)	1
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	1
Xavi Simons (RB Leipzig)	1
Joey Veerman (PSV)	1
Granit Xhaka (Bayer Leverkusen)	1

FORWARDS

Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	22
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	13
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	9
Kylian Mbappe (Paris Saint-Germain)	9
Serhou Guirassy (Stuttgart)	8
Rodrygo (Real Madrid)	7
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	5
Son Heung-min (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Victor Boniface (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Alvaro Morata (Atletico Madrid)	3
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	3
Jeremy Doku (Manchester City)	2
Santiago Gimenez (Feyenoord)	2
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	2
Julian Alvarez (Manchester City)	1
Artem Dovbyk (Girona)	1
Edin Dzeko (Fenerbahce)	1
Evanilson (Porto)	1
Mauro Icardi (Galatasaray)	1
Romelu Lukaku (Roma)	1
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	1
Savio (Girona)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

6 of the best

Under-17 World Cup starlets

Nick Bidwell picks out some of the stars of the recent tournament in Indonesia, which was won by Germany

1 Taha BENRHOZIL

MOROCCO

Naturally flamboyant goalkeepers can often be a liability, too keen to indulge in a risky high-wire act. Yet somehow Benrhozil, who plays for the Mohammed VI academy based in Sale in the Moroccan capital of Rabat, makes living on the edge work. Ultra-confident, he never dwells on a mistake.

While a relative lack of height puts him at a disadvantage when coming to claim crosses, he more than makes up for it with his spectacular reflexes and electric dashes off his line in one-on-one duels with attackers.

The penalty shootout hero of Morocco's last-16 victory against Iran – after the Atlas Lions had topped a group comprising hosts Indonesia, Ecuador and Panama – he adopts a uniquely disconcerting method, standing to one side of the goal rather than in the middle.

2 Paris BRUNNER

GERMANY

In a triumphant German side that derived a large part of its life force from its unity and tough mentality, the roving Dortmund frontrunner made an altogether different type of contribution as the side's incisive and individualistic game-changer.

A worthy Player of the Tournament, he came into his own in the knockout phase, not only netting in the quarter-final, semis and final, but also smashing home the decisive spot-kick in the dramatic penalty shootout victory over Argentina in the semi-finals. He was also the tournament MVP and joint-top scorer when Germany won the European Under-17 title six months ago in Hungary, where they again defeated France in the final on penalties.

3 Claudio ECHEVERRI
ARGENTINA

Despite experiencing two major moments of heartache during the tournament – the death of his beloved grandmother and a penalty miss in the semi-final shootout loss to Germany – the attacking midfielder known as *El Diablito* (the Little Devil) still managed to catch the eye in Indonesia with his sublime ball control, thread-the-needle passes, dynamism and goalscoring nous.

The Argentine skipper was on the score sheet five times in all, including a sensational hat-trick in the quarter-final victory over arch-rivals Brazil. With River Plate since the age of ten, he counts PSG, Manchester City and Real Madrid among his many admirers.

4 ESTEVAO
BRAZIL

The Palmeiras right-winger goes by the nickname of "Messinho" and certainly knows how to put on a display of flank virtuosity: the retention of the ball in constricted spots, extreme pace, a vast array of tricks and bodily subterfuge. Exceptional in give-and-go routines and when cutting inside to shoot, he was on the score sheet three times in Indonesia.

Signed his first pro contract with Palmeiras last spring, which should take him through to 2026. But will he stay that long? PSG recently had three bids for him turned down, with the highest a reported €40 million offer. Palmeiras, however – who will lose fellow wonderkid Endrick in July to Real Madrid – are demanding much more.

5 Joachim KAYI SANDA
FRANCE

Sport Republic, the London-based sports investment firm who bought northern French side Valenciennes last summer, go weak at the knees when face-to-face with youngsters with huge potential and rightly see France's Under-17 central defender and captain as the jewel in the crown of the latest addition to their stable of clubs.

Another product of the seemingly endless supply of quality footballers from the Greater Paris area, he combines power, tenacity, calmness under pressure and incredible maturity for one so young. Valenciennes director of sport Ben Chorley predicts that Kayi Sanda, who only made his Ligue 2 debut in October, will soon will be playing in the Champions League.

6 Hamidou MAKALOU
MALI

This diminutive, all-action midfielder was omnipresent as Mali soared to a well-deserved bronze medal. To describe him merely as a workaholic engine room anchor only paints half the picture. In addition to his penchant for covering every blade of grass, he is eminently creative too, very comfortable on the ball, outstanding in his distribution and a free-kick specialist.

He scored two goals, including a brilliant solo effort in the third-place play-off against Argentina. He came through the JMG academy, which produced the like of Yves Bissouma (Tottenham Hotspur) and Amadou Haidara (RB Leipzig).

Surprise packages... Albania players celebrate beating Czech Republic 3-0 in Tirana

SPECIAL FEATURE

Six shock qualifiers

Wilf MacDonnell and **Nick Bidwell** pick out some of the standout stories from the Euro 2024 qualifying campaign

ALBANIA

Albania confirmed their place at Euro 2024 with a cagey 1-1 draw in Moldova. Despite the anticlimactic finale, the streets of central Tirana were soon flooded with Albanian supporters donning the iconic double-headed eagle, overjoyed by their nation reaching only its second-ever major tournament.

The qualification marks a risk successfully taken by the Albanian Football Association. The powers that be decided to break away from the formulaic, defensive football that had served the nation adequately since the departure of Gianni De Biasi who guided them to Euro 2016, by hiring former Arsenal, Barcelona and Brazil left-back Sylvinho.

Sylvinho brought with him his ex-Manchester City team-mate Pablo Zabaleta and former Brazil colleague Doriva as assistants. He also brought a much-needed positivity to the role, which immediately warmed him to supporters, having been told to keep their expectations in check for countless years. There was even more to smile about when the coaching staff stepped back and looked at the Eagles' Euro 2024 qualifying group: Moldova, Poland, Czech Republic and Faroe Islands were all that stood in the way of a place in Germany.

In truth, Albania qualified with relative ease. Two under-par performances away in Poland and the Czech Republic were counteracted by comfortable home wins in the reverse fixtures. Poland's disappointing campaign under the now-departed Fernando Santos meant Albania still topped the group despite drawing their last two games against Moldova and Faroe Islands.

The penalty to put Albania 1-0 up in the penultimate game against Moldova was scored by the symbolic Sokol Cikalleshi. Little was expected of the ageing forward for this campaign, especially after the emergence of Armando Broja. But Albania had to qualify without the injured young Chelsea star, with Cikalleshi leading the line in his absence.

Another unexpected success story was Jasir Asani, a 28-year-old winger who had not featured for Albania until this campaign. Currently playing his club football in South Korea after spells in Hungary, Sweden and North Macedonia, he was something of a surprise call-up by Sylvinho, but he repaid his manager's faith twice over with vital goals in victories against Moldova, Poland and the Czech Republic to all but seal qualification.

Elsewhere, Berat Djimsiti captained the side brilliantly, as the dominant centre-back finally replicated his club form with Atalanta for his national team. Sassuolo's attacking midfielder Nedim Bajrami also looked much happier under Sylvinho, excelling in a role with more freedom and scoring a screamer with Albania's only shot of the game in a vital 1-1 draw in Prague.

Albania have proved once again how well they can set up defensively, conceding just four goals in eight matches. The test in Germany will be what threat they can provide in attack. The lowest-scoring team to top their qualifying group, they will expect the returning Broja to give them much more cutting edge come the summer's finals.

Key men...Scotland midfielders Scott McTominay and John McGinn

SCOTLAND

In the wake of Scotland's string of excellent performances in qualification, losing just one game in Group A, no Euro 2024 opponent is likely to make the mistake of underestimating Steve Clarke's side. While many international teams continue to fly by the seat of their pants, relying on moments of individual brilliance to prevail, the Scots are a totally different proposition: a genuine, intelligently constructed collective with a club-like organisation and spirit.

This is not the most balanced team you will ever see, stacked with talent at wing-back and in midfield – the department featuring seven-goal marksman Scott McTominay – but not nearly as well-endowed in other areas of the pitch. But what an outstanding unit they form, everyone fulfilling their tasks to perfection and oozing solidarity, grit and belief. Braveheart plus the prime time – represented by McTominay, John McGinn, Andy Robertson and Kieran Tierney – that's how they upset group winners Spain 2-0 at Hampden Park and turned a one-goal deficit in Norway into a last-gasp victory.

AUSTRIA

Never mind his well-documented difficulties at the thoroughly dysfunctional workplace that is Manchester United, Ralf Rangnick remains a fine coach and has proved it in his 18 months at the helm of Austria. In a highly successful European qualification campaign, *Das Team* racked up six wins and just one loss (a 3-2 defeat at home to group winners Belgium).

Under Rangnick, a previously passive Austria have spectacularly discovered ambition, pro-activity and controlled aggression. His predecessor, Franco Foda, set the Austrians up defensively, happy to sit back and invite pressure. Now they are much more interested in taking the initiative.

Rangnick has transformed their entire mindset. No longer are half-measures allowed. This quest for perfection was perfectly illustrated in Rangnick's reaction to a late France equaliser in a 1-1 UEFA Nations League draw in the autumn of 2022. Informed in a post-match interview that it was still a great result for the Austrians, Rangnick vehemently disagreed: "We have nothing to congratulate ourselves for. I was generally happy with our game but not the result. We had the lead for a long time, then gave it away."

ROMANIA

Bearing in mind that between 2002 and 2022, the *Tricolorii* only participated in two international tournaments (the 2008 and 2016 Euros), it was an absolute bolt from the blue for the Romanians to complete a qualification masterclass, winning Group I with plenty to spare, one of only six nations to remain undefeated. All of a sudden, every football fan in Romania is upbeat, with some pundits even comparing the current generation with the glorious Gheorghe Hagi-inspired side of the '90s.

Expertly led by coach Edward Iordanescu – whose father Anghel was head coach when the team famously reached the quarter-finals of USA '94, and led them again at Euro 2016 – the current Romanian side is not nearly as technically accomplished, but compensates with its watertight defence, outstanding pressing game and never-say-die character. That spirit came in especially useful last June, when they scored two late goals to salvage a 2-2 draw in Switzerland.

Much of Romania's improvement of late has stemmed from the extensive use of graduates from the Under-21s, particularly winger Valentin Mihaila, striker George Puscas and attacking midfielder Ianis Hagi, Gheorghe's son.

SLOVAKIA

Following Slovakia's disastrous showing in the 2022-23 Nations League, a campaign in which they lost home and away to Kazakhstan and were humiliated on their own patch by Azerbaijan in League C, supporters of the boys in blue were not exactly optimistic of making the 2024 European Championship cut. So what a turnaround it was for the Falcons to confidently go about their qualification business, eventually earning a ticket as Group J runners-up.

Slovakia were not always pretty in their play; at times they lacked quality in the final third and often overdosed on long balls. But effective they certainly were, winning seven of their ten ties and even holding their own in the two narrow defeats against mighty Portugal.

Their Italian head coach Francesco Calzona, who took over in the autumn of 2022 after that Nations League debacle, did a marvellous job in assembling a cohesive, hard to beat unit. A long-time assistant to Maurizio Sarri at Sorrento, Empoli and Napoli, Calzona, once a coffee salesman, invariably gets his tactical brew just right.

SLOVENIA

Little wonder Slovenian players and fans at the Stozice Stadium in Ljubljana celebrated so wildly on sealing automatic qualification following a hard-fought 2-1 home win over Kazakhstan. Runners-up in Group H, where Denmark topped the pool and Kazakhstan and Finland ran both automatic qualifiers extremely close, the Slovenians can now look forward to a rare outing on the big stage. They last featured at a European Championship way back in 2000, and Euro 2024 will be their first major tournament since the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Panathinaikos left-winger Benjamin Verbic proved the hero of the hour in the all-important victory over Kazakhstan, cutting inside to rifle home a stunning winner six minutes from time. But he must share the plaudits with Benjamin Sesko, whose five-goal tally – behind only Denmark's Rasmus Hojlund's seven in the group – helped fire his nation to the finals and underlined the 20-year-old striker's massive potential.

See page 66 for a full qualifying review.

Slovenia's hero... Benjamin Verbic

World Soccer Awards 2023

THE RESULTS OF OUR 42ND ANNUAL AWARDS – AND THE PEOPLE WHO HELPED SHAPE THE GAME OVER THE PAST 12 MONTHS

PLAYER
COACH/TEAM
WOMEN
PEOPLE
OBITUARIES

28

35

36

32

30

CITY AND SPAIN'S YEAR

Manchester City complete a clean sweep of Player, Manager and Team of the Year awards, while Spain shine in the women's categories

Some years voting for the *World Soccer* awards is easier than others and, in 2023, credit is due to Erling Haaland, Pep Guardiola, Manchester City, Aitana Bonmati and Spain for giving the majority of our voting panel some fairly straightforward decisions.

Haaland and Bonmati were the clear standout players in teams that achieved huge success; so clear, in fact, that none of our voters failed to include them somewhere in their top five selections – and in most cases as first choice.

EA SPORTS
Premier League
26
20
82
31

Pep Guardiola once again displayed his managerial genius in orchestrating Manchester City's historic treble, while the team's exceptional performance was reflected in the fact that four of their squad were ranked in the top ten Players of the Year.

For the Women's Team of the Year award, only Champions League winners Barcelona Femeni – another exceptional side that Bonmati was at the heart of – offered any kind of challenge to world champions Spain.

Haaland and Bonmati were the clear standout players in teams that achieved huge success

The closest-run award, then, was the Women's Manager of the Year. In normal circumstances, the World Cup-winning coach would be the standout candidate. But the chaotic build-up to the finals in Australia and New Zealand, which saw 15 Spanish players withdraw from selection – effectively, though very much not explicitly – in protest at the head coach's position, along with his subsequent dismissal by the RFEF after the tournament, meant that Jorge Vilda was barely in contention. Most observers, it seems, felt that Spain won the World Cup in spite of their manager rather than because of him.

That left a straight shootout between his opposite number in Sydney, England's Sarina Wiegman, eyeing a second consecutive Manager of the Year award, and Barcelona coach Jonatan Giraldez. Thanks to the 32-year-old Catalan, Barca not only won the Champions League and the league title, but also formed the spine of Spain's success Down Under.

That, though, was not quite enough to beat Wiegman. It is a mark of how far England have come under her

Winners...City's Pep Guardiola and Erling Haaland with the UEFA Super Cup

Previous World Player of the Year winners

1980s

1982 Paolo Rossi
Juventus & Italy
1983 Zico
Udinese & Brazil
1984 Michel Platini
Juventus & France
1985 Michel Platini
Juventus & France
1986 Diego Maradona
Napoli & Argentina
1987 Ruud Gullit
PSV/Milan & Netherlands
1988 Marco van Basten
Milan & Netherlands
1989 Ruud Gullit
Milan & Netherlands

1990s

1990 Lothar Matthaus
Internazionale & West Germany
1991 Jean-Pierre Papin
Marseille & France
1992 Marco van Basten
Milan & Netherlands
1993 Roberto Baggio
Juventus & Italy
1994 Paolo Maldini
Milan & Italy
1995 Gianluca Vialli
Juventus & Italy
1996 Ronaldo
PSV/Barcelona & Brazil
1997 Ronaldo
Barcelona/Internazionale & Brazil
1998 Zinedine Zidane
Juventus & France
1999 Rivaldo
Barcelona & Brazil

2000s

2000 Luis Figo
Barcelona/Real Madrid & Portugal
2001 Michael Owen
Liverpool & England
2002 Ronaldo
Internazionale/Real Madrid & Brazil
2003 Pavel Nedved
Juventus & Czech Republic
2004 Ronaldinho
Barcelona & Brazil
2005 Ronaldinho
Barcelona & Brazil
2006 Fabio Cannavaro
Juventus/Real Madrid & Italy
2007 Kaka
Milan & Brazil
2008 Cristiano Ronaldo
Manchester United & Portugal
2009 Lionel Messi
Barcelona & Argentina

2010s

2010 Xavi
Barcelona & Spain
2011 Lionel Messi
Barcelona & Argentina
2012 Lionel Messi
Barcelona & Argentina
2013 Cristiano Ronaldo
Real Madrid & Portugal
2014 Cristiano Ronaldo
Real Madrid & Portugal
2015 Lionel Messi
Barcelona & Argentina
2016 Cristiano Ronaldo
Real Madrid & Portugal
2017 Cristiano Ronaldo
Real Madrid & Portugal
2018 Luka Modric
Real Madrid & Croatia
2019 Lionel Messi
Barcelona & Argentina

Women's Player of the Year...Aitana Bonmati celebrates winning the World Cup with Spain

that a World Cup silver medal felt like a disappointment, yet it should be remembered that the Lionesses went into the tournament missing a number of heroines from the European Championship-winning campaign a year earlier, including the 2022 Women's Player of the Year Beth Mead and skipper Leah Williamson. England's progression to one of the two best sides in the world remains a feat of coaching as much as playing talent.

As always, the voting also offers a glimpse to the future. Third-placed Jude Bellingham is sure to be a contender for next year's award if he can shine for England at Euro 2024, as will PSG and France's Kylian Mbappe, runner-up for the second year in a row. Meanwhile, Lionel Messi continues to draw votes even in Major League Soccer, and will be a contender for a record-extending seventh Player of the Year award if he can fire Argentina to more success in next summer's Copa America.

Jamie Evans

2020s

2020 Robert Lewandowski	*Bayern Munich & Poland*
2021 Robert Lewandowski	*Bayern Munich & Poland*
2022 Lionel Messi	*Paris Saint-Germain & Argentina*

2023 WINNERS

MEN'S WORLD PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Rank	Name	Total
1	**Erling Haaland** *Manchester City & Norway*	298
2	**Kylian Mbappe** *Paris Saint-Germain & France*	128
3	**Jude Bellingham** *Borussia Dortmund/Real Madrid & England*	94
4	**Rodri** *Manchester City & Spain*	93
5	**Harry Kane** *Tottenham Hotspur/ Bayern Munich & England*	78
6	**Lionel Messi** *Paris Saint-Germain/ Inter Miami & Argentina*	73
7	**Kevin De Bruyne** *Manchester City & Belgium*	58
8	**Victor Osimhen** *Napoli & Nigeria*	46
9	**Ilkay Gundogan** *Manchester City/ Barcelona & Germany*	18
10	**Lautaro Martinez** *Internazionale & Argentina*	17
11	**Khvicha Kvaratskhelia** *Napoli & Georgia*	14
12	**Vinicius Junior** *Real Madrid & Brazil*	15
13	**Antoine Griezmann** *Atletico Madrid & France*	8
14	**Mohamed Salah** *Liverpool & Egypt*	7
15	**Luka Modric** *Real Madrid & Croatia*	6
16	**Bernardo Silva** *Manchester City & Portugal*	5
17	**Rafael Leao** *Milan & Portugal*	4
18=	**Bukayo Saka** *Arsenal & England*	2
18=	**German Cano** *Fluminense & Argentina*	2
18=	**Giovanni Di Lorenzo** *Napoli & Italy*	2
18=	**Julian Alvarez** *Manchester City & Argentina*	2
18=	**Marcelo Brozovic** *Internazionale/ Al Nassr & Croatia*	2
23=	**Alisson** *Liverpool & Brazil*	1
23=	**Martin Zubimendi** *Real Sociedad & Spain*	1
23=	**Yassine Bounou** *Sevilla/Al Hilal & Morocco*	1

MEN'S WORLD MANAGER OF THE YEAR

Rank	Name	Total
1	**Pep Guardiola** *Manchester City*	52
2	**Luciano Spalletti** *Napoli*	3
3	**Simone Inzaghi** *Internazionale*	2
4=	**Eirik Horneland** *Brann*	1
4=	**Imanol Alguacil** *Real Sociedad*	1
4=	**Lionel Scaloni** *Argentina*	1
4=	**Raffaele Palladino** *Monza*	1
4=	**Steve Clarke** *Scotland*	1
4=	**Unai Emery** *Aston Villa*	1
4=	**Urs Fischer** *Union Berlin*	1
4=	**Xabi Alonso** *Bayer Leverkusen*	1

MEN'S WORLD TEAM OF THE YEAR

Rank	Name	Total
1	**Manchester City**	55
2	**Napoli**	4
3	**Argentina**	3
4	**Fluminense**	2
5	**Real Sociedad**	1

WOMEN'S WORLD PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Rank	Name	Total
1	**Aitana Bonmati** *Barcelona & Spain*	178
2	**Sam Kerr** *Chelsea & Australia*	94
3	**Mary Earps** *Manchester United & England*	42
4	**Jenni Hermoso** *Barcelona & Spain*	26
5	**Salma Paralluelo** *Barcelona & Spain*	24
6	**Alexandra Popp** *Wolfsburg & Germany*	22
7	**Olga Carmona** *Real Madrid & Spain*	20
8	**Fridolina Rolfo** *Barcelona & Sweden*	16
9=	**Linda Caicedo** *Deportivo Cali/Real Madrid & Colombia*	12
9=	**Patricia Guijarro** *Barcelona & Spain*	12
11	**Mariona Caldentey** *Barcelona & Spain*	11
12	**Alexia Putellas** *Barcelona & Spain*	10
13	**Lauren James** *Chelsea & England*	8
14=	**Caroline Graham Hansen** *Barcelona & Norway*	7
14=	**Keira Walsh** *Barcelona & England*	7
16	**Millie Bright** *Chelsea & England*	6
17	**Lucy Bronze** *Barcelona & England*	5
18	**Khadija Shaw** *Manchester City & Jamaica*	4
19=	**Asisat Oshoala** *Barcelona & Nigeria*	3
19=	**Hinata Miyazawa** *MyNavi Sendai/ Manchester United & Japan*	3
19=	**Tamires** *Corinthians & Brazil*	3
22=	**Amanda Ilestedt** *Paris Saint-Germain/ Arsenal & Sweden*	2
22=	**Caroline Weir** *Real Madrid & Scotland*	2
22=	**Ewa Pajor** *Wolfsburg & Poland*	2
22=	**Guro Reiten** *Chelsea & Norway*	2
22=	**Leah Williamson** *Arsenal & England*	2
27=	**Alex Morgan** *San Diego Wave & USA*	1
27=	**Chloe Kelly** *Manchester City & England*	1
27=	**Esmee Brugts** *PSV/Barcelona & Netherlands*	1
27=	**Lieke Martens** *Paris Saint-Germain & Netherlands*	1
27=	**Lynn Williams** *NJ/NY Gotham & USA*	1
27=	**Mapi Leon** *Barcelona & Spain*	1
27=	**Sophia Smith** *Portland Thorns & USA*	1

WOMEN'S WORLD MANAGER OF THE YEAR

Rank	Name	Total
1	**Sarina Wiegman** *England*	15
2	**Jonatan Giraldez** *Barcelona*	11
3	**Jorge Vilda** *Spain*	4
4	**Emma Hayes** *Chelsea*	3
5=	**Futoshi Ikeda** *Japan*	1
5=	**Juan Carlos Amoros** *NJ/NY Gotham*	1
5=	**Peter Gerhardsson** *Sweden*	1

WOMEN'S WORLD TEAM OF THE YEAR

Rank	Name	Total
1	**Spain**	21
2	**Barcelona**	12
3=	**Australia**	1
3=	**Chelsea**	1
3=	**England**	1

THE VOTING PANEL

Adam White	*France*
Adel Ferdowsipour	*Iran*
Alexander Bobrov	*Russia*
Alexandra Jonson	*Spain*
Ashok Purohit	*Oman*
Asif Burhan	*England*
Boris Bogdanov	*Russia*
Carl Worswick	*Colombia*
Danny Lewis	*England*
Dariusz Kurowski	*Poland*
Domenic Aquilina	*Malta*
Emanuele Giulianelli	*Italy*
Emmanuel Ayamga	*Ghana*
Fabio Licari	*Italy*
Flo Lloyd-Hughes	*England*
Francois Colin	*Belgium*
Glenn Moore	*England*
Henry Flynn	*Spain*
James Kelly	*Wales*
James Nalton	*United States*
Jamie Carragher	*England*
Jamie Evans	*World Soccer*
Jared Tinslay	*World Soccer*
Jim Holden	*Denmark*
Jonathan Norcroft	*England*
Josh Butler	*England*
Juraj Vrdoljak	*Croatia*
Keir Radnedge	*England*
Klaas-Jan Droppert	*Netherlands*
Manos Staramopoulos	*Greece*
Mark Gleeson	*South Africa*
Mark Pitman	*Wales*
Martin del Palacio Langer	*Mexico*
Mike Plastow	*Japan*
Milorad Stojmanovski	*North Macedonia*
Miron Goihman	*Moldova*
Nick Bidwell	*Germany*
Oleg Zadernovsky	*Ukraine*
Oluwashina Okeleji	*Nigeria*
Paddy Agnew	*Italy*
Paul Hassall	*England*
Peter Drury	*England*
Peterjon Cresswell	*Hungary*
Phil Gordon	*Scotland*
Philippe Auclair	*France*
Rasim Movsumzadeh	*Azerbaijan*
Rich Laverty	*England*
Rumen Paytashev	*Bulgaria*
Ryan Baldi	*England*
Sam Beckwith	*Czech Republic*
Sam Matterface	*England*
Samindra Kunti	*Belgium*
Sander Berends	*Netherlands*
Sean Creedon	*Republic of Ireland*
Sid Lowe	*Spain*
Simon Hill	*Australia*
Sophie Lawson	*England*
Stephen Fishlock	*World Soccer*
Steve Menary	*England*
Tom Kundert	*Portugal*
Troels Bager Thogersen	*Denmark*
Vicente Dattoli	*Brazil*
Victor Gusev	*Russia*
Vidir Sigurdsson	*Iceland*
Vladimir Novak	*Serbia*
Zdravko Reic	*Croatia*

Men's Player of the Year...Erling Haaland

PLAYER

ERLING HAALAND

Men's World Player of the Year

Looking back at the reports from Erling Haaland's first competitive match in English football provides a reminder of the dangers of judging players too harshly too early.

"Upstaged," "a debut to forget," and "barely touched the ball," were all words that featured in *ESPN*'s report of Haaland's debut in the 2022 Community Shield between Manchester City and Liverpool. A "horror show," said *The Sun*. Haaland looked "bewildered," according to *The Daily Mail*, while *The Guardian* said he was "near-anonymous" and "disrupted the side's rhythm". BBC Sport's stats on the Norwegian were also damning: "In all, Haaland had just 16 touches of the ball in his 97 minutes on the pitch, completing seven of only nine passes he attempted in the game."

When Haaland's game concluded with a miss from five yards out, the narrative was set: "City's £50 million flop". This was what all the fuss was about? This was the player who had been tearing apart defences across Europe? Pep Guardiola convinced nobody outside of Manchester when he insisted that he was not worried. "He [Haaland] is going to help us," said the City boss.

By the start of 2023, all but one of those criticisms had been dismissed. With 21 goals before the turn of the year, Haaland's individual goalscoring quality was beyond doubt. Yet on New Year's Day, City trailed Arsenal at the top of the Premier League by seven

Key moment...Haaland watches Rodri score Manchester City's Champions League-winner

Missing out... Haaland won't be playing at Euro 2024

Goal machine... the final piece in the Manchester City jigsaw

points. Maybe he had disrupted his team's rhythm. Maybe they had become a lesser team, despite their shiny new star. In these pages, Jonathan Wilson wrote: "Haaland is a magnificent forward and a great goalscorer, but it may be that he has made City as a team worse."

Did City lose something in catering to Haaland? A little of the control, a little of the structure? Perhaps. In the 2021-22 Premier League season, City's last before Haaland arrived, they scored more goals, conceded fewer, and won more games than they did with him in the team.

Ultimately though, such concerns were made to look laughable by Haaland's individual output and City's trophy haul. He ended the season with a record 36 Premier League goals, plus another 12 in the Champions League, collecting the Golden Boots in both competitions. His overall tally of 52 goals, another record for a Premier League player, came in just 53 games – the only English top-flight player to notch more is Everton's Dixie Dean, in 1927-28. In November, Haaland scored his 50th Premier League goal in his 48th appearance, hitting the milestone faster than any other player.

It is a point that has been made often since the Norwegian arrived in Manchester, but bears repeating: when you take a team of such technical supremacy that is capable of exerting total control over matches, and you add a goalscorer of such devastating ruthlessness, the results are frightening. Haaland was the final piece in an already near-perfect jigsaw.

Pre-Haaland City would kill opponents with a thousand cuts; with him in the side, they deliver instant killer blows with one swing of his boot or nod of his head.

He is a player whose very presence on the pitch delivers a psychological blow to opposing teams. Defending against him requires constant vigilance; stray for a second and he will punish you. Entire pre-match meetings will be spent on devising ways to stop him. He constantly occupies opponents, if not physically then mentally.

City's winner in the Champions League final is a fine example. As Bernardo Silva scampers into the box to cross the ball, Inter's panicked defenders' first instinct is to rush to Haaland. He is surrounded, marked by as many as four different players at once, leaving oceans of room for Rodri to arrive and sweep the ball home. A vintage Haaland display? Certainly not – failing to get on the score sheet in Istanbul was perhaps the one cherry missing from the top of an otherwise perfect 2023 cake – but his value to the team beyond his own astonishing goal input was demonstrated in that moment.

Haaland was the final piece in an already near-perfect jigsaw

If it was a perfect year in club football for Haaland, in international football it was a different story. Norway's bid to qualify for Euro 2024 collapsed with a whimper, finishing behind Spain and Scotland in their qualifying group, while they also missed out on the play-offs via their UEFA Nations League ranking. Haaland's individual record of six goals in five qualifiers shows that he certainly is not the problem – his overall return of 27 goals in 29 caps means that he is already only six away from Norway's all-time scoring record – but he will be anxious for the rest of the team to match his own high standards. History shows that even some of the very finest players have missed out on World Cups; he will not want to join that list.

Jamie Evans

FACT FILE

Age *23 (21.07.2000)*
Club *Manchester City (Eng)*
Country *Norway*
Previous clubs *Bryne, Molde, Red Bull Salzburg, Borussia Dortmund*
2023 Honours *Premier League, FA Cup, UEFA Champions League, UEFA Super Cup*

COACH/TEAM

PEP GUARDIOLA & MANCHESTER CITY

Men's World Manager of the Year, Men's World Team of the Year

Manchester City ended 2022 with a fragmented 1-1 draw at the Etihad on New Year's Eve against Frank Lampard's troubled Everton. The result left Pep Guardiola's side seven points behind table toppers Arsenal having both played the same number of fixtures.

Things looked a little bleaker for the reigning champions a couple of weeks later, too, after they lost the Manchester derby 2-1 at Old Trafford. Mikel Arteta's Gunners moved eight points clear at the top of the Premier League, seemingly in control of the title race.

City responded by going on a formidable run, winning 16 of their next 18 league matches, including home and away against Arsenal.

By then, the ever-tightening pressure of Guardiola's side had constricted Arsenal, causing them to drop points they hadn't looked like dropping in the first half of the season. The Gunners' defeat to Nottingham Forest handed Manchester City a third league title in a row with, fittingly, three games to spare. One trophy down, two to go.

Club captain...Ilkay Gundogan celebrates scoring the FA Cup final's fastest-ever goal

Next in their quest for silverware was a first-ever all-Manchester FA Cup final. Having already lost once to Erik ten Hag's side in 2023, there were some nerves among the City faithful, but a brilliant brace from captain Ilkay Gundogan, including the quickest goal

in an FA Cup final after just 12 seconds, sealed their domestic double.

There was still a sense, though, that despite another season of domestic dominance, City's campaign wouldn't be complete without a first Champions League crown to go with it. They had stampeded their way through the early year's knockout phases, thrashing RB Leipzig 8-1 on aggregate in the last 16, Bayern Munich 4-1 in the quarter-finals and Real Madrid 5-1 in the semi-finals.

The omens looked ominous for the last team standing, Internazionale, who themselves were struggling to secure a top-four spot in Serie A. Still, the final at the Ataturk Olympic Stadium in Istanbul happened to be a far tighter contest than many had predicted.

It took City until the second half to finally break the deadlock. Rodri, making his 52nd start of the season in all competitions – second only to Lionel Messi's 57 Barcelona appearances in 2011-12 for a Pep Guardiola-managed side – scored from 15 yards out following a Bernardo Silva assist, while goalkeeper Ederson was forced to make some crucial stops late in the game.

The shift to a 3-2-4-1 formation in 2023 has been one of the most successful tactical innovations of Guardiola's managerial career so far

Rodri's goal was City's 151st in all competitions in 2022-23, more than any other side in Europe's top five leagues. Nevertheless, when an emotional Guardiola was asked after the game what the difference was between this year's side and the one that had lost to Chelsea in the 2021 final, he alluded to their defensive improvements.

"I think we defend a little bit better in the box," he said. "We are four central defenders plus Kyle Walker. We are proper defenders. Even when we make mistakes, we have the feeling that we are more solid."

The shift to a 3-2-4-1 formation in 2023 has been one of the most successful tactical innovations of his managerial career so far. The 1-0 win over Crystal Palace in March was the first time he played with Nathan Ake, Ruben Dias and Manuel Akanji in defence and Rodri and John Stones as a double pivot ahead of them.

He named the same five in the 7-0 win over RB Leipzig at the Etihad, both legs of the quarter-final against Bayern Munich and again in the final against Inter.

It was only when Ake suffered with injuries that Kyle Walker took his place in the starting line-up, including the title showdown with Arsenal, the two-legged semi-final against Real Madrid and the FA Cup final win over United.

The additional centre-back increased City's defensive cover and reduced their vulnerability on the counter-attack, while Stones and Rodri's defensive astuteness provided extra stability. It meant the four attacking midfielders could exploit the extra space and offer multiple interchangeable options, making them unpredictable and difficult to defend against, while Erling Haaland provided the finishing touches. Above all, it gave them the thing that Guardiola craves the most: control. Control of possession, control of transitions, control of the game.

City's maiden Champions League crown, and first European trophy since 1970, saw them become just the second Premier League club after Manchester United to win a treble of all three major trophies in one season, while Guardiola became the first-ever manager to win the treble with two different clubs. The Spanish coach is also now one of only three managers in history to win the Premier League, Champions League, FA Cup and League Cup, alongside Sir Alex Ferguson with Manchester United and Jurgen Klopp with Liverpool.

The Champions League final also happened to be Guardiola's 300th win while in charge of City, coming after just 413 matches – no manager has needed fewer games to reach the milestone with an English top-flight club.

He then lifted a record-equalling fourth UEFA Super Cup in August in the win over Sevilla on penalties, becoming the first manager to win the trophy with three different clubs. It also saw him draw level with Bob Paisley (13) for the most major titles with English clubs in men's football, second only to Ferguson.

The treble...City players parade the Champions League, Premier League and FA Cup trophies through Manchester

Potential FIFA Club World Cup success, still to be decided at the time of writing, could take City's trophy tally for 2023 to five, which would see Guardiola surpass Paisley and make it City's biggest trophy haul in a calendar year in the club's history.

Jared Tinslay

PREVIOUS WINNERS

WORLD MANAGER OF THE YEAR

1982 Enzo Bearzot, *Italy*
1983 Sepp Piontek, *Denmark*
1984 Michel Hidalgo, *France*
1985 Terry Venables, *Barcelona*
1986 Guy Thys, *Belgium*
1987 Johan Cruyff, *Ajax*
1988 Rinus Michels, *Netherlands/B. Leverkusen*
1989 Arrigo Sacchi, *Milan*
1990 Franz Beckenbauer, *West Germany/Marseille*
1991 Michel Platini, *France*
1992 Richard Moller Nielsen, *Denmark*
1993 Alex Ferguson, *Manchester United*
1994 Carlos Alberto Parreira, *Brazil*
1995 Louis van Gaal, *Ajax*
1996 Berti Vogts, *Germany*
1997 Ottmar Hitzfeld, *Borussia Dortmund*
1998 Arsene Wenger, *Arsenal*
1999 Alex Ferguson, *Manchester United*
2000 Dino Zoff, *Italy*
2001 Gerard Houllier, *Liverpool*
2002 Guus Hiddink, *South Korea/PSV*
2003 Carlo Ancelotti, *Milan*
2004 Jose Mourinho, *Porto/Chelsea*
2005 Jose Mourinho, *Chelsea*
2006 Marcello Lippi, *Italy*
2007 Alex Ferguson, *Manchester United*
2008 Alex Ferguson, *Manchester United*
2009 Pep Guardiola, *Barcelona*
2010 Jose Mourinho, *Internazionale/Real Madrid*
2011 Pep Guardiola, *Barcelona*
2012 Vicente del Bosque, *Spain*
2013 Jupp Heynckes, *Bayern Munich*
2014 Joachim Low, *Germany*
2015 Luis Enrique, *Barcelona*
2016 Claudio Ranieri, *Leicester City*
2017 Zinedine Zidane, *Real Madrid*
2018 Didier Deschamps, *France*
2019 Jurgen Klopp, *Liverpool*
2020 Hansi Flick, *Bayern Munich*
2021 Roberto Mancini, *Italy*
2022 Lionel Scaloni, *Argentina*

WORLD TEAM OF THE YEAR

1982 *Brazil*
1983 *Hamburg*
1984 *France*
1985 *Everton*
1986 *Argentina*
1987 *Porto*
1988 *Netherlands*
1989 *Milan*
1990 *West Germany*
1991 *France*
1992 *Denmark*
1993 *Parma*
1994 *Milan*
1995 *Ajax*
1996 *Nigeria*
1997 *Borussia Dortmund*
1998 *France*
1999 *Manchester United*
2000 *France*
2001 *Liverpool*
2002 *Brazil*
2003 *Milan*
2004 *Greece*
2005 *Liverpool*
2006 *Barcelona*
2007 *Iraq*
2008 *Spain*
2009 *Barcelona*
2010 *Spain*
2011 *Barcelona*
2012 *Spain*
2013 *Bayern Munich*
2014 *Germany*
2015 *Barcelona*
2016 *Leicester City*
2017 *Real Madrid*
2018 *France*
2019 *Liverpool*
2020 *Bayern Munich*
2021 *Italy*
2022 *Argentina*

PLAYER/TEAM

AITANA BONMATI & SPAIN

Women's World Player of the Year, Women's World Team of the Year

Women's World Player of the Year...Aitana Bonmati

Amid the scandal that engulfed Spanish women's football following the post-match behaviour of subsequently axed federation president Luis Rubiales, the actual football was at times overlooked. That was a cruel irony as Spain's players produced a string of performances of maturity and class, none more so than in the World Cup final when they defeated European champions England.

At the heart of that, and so many other games in 2023, was Aitana Bonmati, who won the Golden Ball as the tournament's best player. That made for an individual double as she also won the Champions League player of the season for her part in driving Barcelona to the crown.

It would be easy to argue that it was the injury to club and country team-mate Alexia Putellas that enabled the diminutive Bonmati to tower over the 2023 women's season – but it would be wrong. Bonmati, a 5ft 4in pocket dynamo, a coruscating mix of elegance and spiky competitiveness, had long been emerging from the shadow of her gifted team-mate. Even when Putellas won *World Soccer*'s Player of the Year award in 2021, and a welter of other prizes, it was Bonmati who was player of the match when Barca beat Chelsea 4-0 in the Champions League final.

Nevertheless, the absence of Putellas thrust more responsibility on Bonmati, which she has relished, and allowed her more freedom, with which she has flourished.

In the Champions League, no player contributed directly to more goals, assisting eight and scoring five. She scored another ten goals as Barca won the domestic league for the fourth year in succession.

Her part in the national team's World Cup win was more complicated. Outstanding at the 2022 Euros despite Spain's last-eight exit, she was one of the 15 players who withdrew from consideration for the national team in an attempt to force change in the federation's treatment.

The long-running stand-off appeared set to undercut Spain's World Cup bid as the federation refused to bow, instead picking understudies whose solid results underlined the depth of the Spanish game while undermining *Las 15*'s position.

***Campeonas*...Spain captain Ivana Andres lifts the World Cup trophy in Sydney**

Eventually the bulk of the 15 made themselves available again. But the bad blood meant only three were recalled. Bonmati was one. However bitter the dispute was, coach Jorge Vilda knew he could not do without her.

It proved a smart concession, with one of Bonmati's key interventions coming early in the last-16 match against Switzerland.

Spain's serene group-stage progress had concluded with a shock 4-0 loss to Japan, their high line sliced apart, and there were nerves aplenty for a much-changed team given Spain had never previously won a knockout tie in a major competition.

Bonmati's goal set them on their way to a 5-1 win. Spain subsequently beat the Netherlands in extra-time and

Sweden with a late goal, but both after dominating the game, before dispatching England in Sydney.

Bonmati scored twice and made three goals but, as with her club, such statistics tell little of her overall contribution. She has been compared, by no less a judge than Pep Guardiola, to Andres Iniesta.

The comparison is apt. Her low centre of gravity enables her to twist and turn with the ball, spinning out of danger, spiriting into spaces, driving at defences. She can pass short or long, has an intuitive ability to find space, and averages a goal every two games for Barca and better than one in three for *La Roja*, for whom she usually plays a slightly deeper role.

She has been compared, by no less a judge than Pep Guardiola, to Andres Iniesta

The similarity is also studied. Bonmati was born 25 miles along the Catalonian coast from Barcelona. Growing up in Sant Pere de Ribes, she would, she told *The Players' Tribune*, "zoom in on Xavi and Iniesta: how they moved, how they created chances, how they scanned the space around them before receiving the ball. Iniesta was always driving the ball forward, so I tried to do that. Today I feel I have the same way of understanding the game. The Barca Way, if you want to call it that."

That understanding was deepened at the famed *La Masia* academy, which she joined at the age of 13. At 17, she was considering going to university in the US, until Barca went professional and opened a domestic career path.

At 18, she made her first-team debut. At 19, having captained Spain to the Euro Under-19 title, her national debut.

She has since become a key component of the Barcelona side that usurped Lyon as the leading force in Europe, and a Spanish one that has conquered both the world, and its own federation.

At 25 she – and Spain – could dominate for years; bad news for rivals, but not for spectators.

Glenn Moore

MANAGER

SARINA WIEGMAN

Women's World Manager of the Year

It didn't seem like much could have surpassed England's historic Euro 2022 victory, but Sarina Wiegman came close to taking the Lionesses to even greater heights in the summer of 2023. The decorated coach added to her proven track record of being one of the best in-tournament coaches in world football when she led England to the 2023 Women's World Cup final.

Wiegman steered the Netherlands to home Euro glory in 2017 and followed that up with a World Cup final in 2019. She has now managed to mirror that same feat with England, taking her streak to four major finals in four consecutive tournaments.

Ultimately England ended up losing 1-0 to Spain in Sydney, with Wiegman's side putting in an underwhelming performance in the final 90 minutes that mattered. But, to make it to back-to-back finals and be so close to a Euros and World Cup double is a phenomenal achievement.

Wiegman's work is even more impressive given England were in poor form heading into the World Cup in Australia and New Zealand and were also without some of their key players because of injury.

England lost to Australia in a friendly just a few months before the World Cup started, a result that ended a 30-game unbeaten run under Wiegman. The team also lost Euro 2022 Golden Boot winner Beth Mead and captain Leah Williamson to ACL injuries, while the experienced duo of Ellen White and Jill Scott retired after the Euros.

Those absentees, combined with England's poor form and stale performances, had a significant impact on expectations heading into the World Cup. The Lionesses didn't start their campaign in particularly impressive form either, with two narrow wins against Haiti and Denmark in the group stage.

It was the last-16 tie against Nigeria that provided the defining moment. Forced to play the entirety of extra-time with ten players after Lauren James' red card, England

World Cup runner-up... Sarina Wiegman

somehow managed to come through a tense penalty shootout. That victory would pave the way for impressive quarter-final and semi-final performances.

England's emphatic 3-1 victory against co-hosts Australia in a packed stadium in Sydney will go down as their most complete performance of the 2023 Women's World Cup and one of their best-ever results. Wiegman's team silenced the partisan crowd and managed to secure a first-ever spot in the Women's World Cup final.

"We had our challenges and we had very hard games," said Wiegman of England's historic journey to the final. "We've also played against countries from every continent, each with their own philosophy, and we found a way to win.

"I'm really proud to have made it to the final. Then you hope to win the final but I know it is hard to make a final and it is special to do so".

Although it wasn't to be for Wiegman and England, the challenges that the head coach faced and overcame encapsulate just how impressive she is.

Flo-Lloyd Hughes

PREVIOUS WINNERS

Women's World Player of the Year

2020
Pernille Harder, *Wolfsburg/Chelsea & Denmark*
2021
Alexia Putellas, *Barcelona & Spain*
2022
Beth Mead, *Arsenal & England*

Women's World Manager of the Year

2020
Jean-Luc Vasseur, *Lyon*
2021
Lluis Cortes, *Barcelona*
2022
Sarina Wiegman, *England*

Women's World Team of the Year

2020
Lyon
2021
Barcelona
2022
England

PLAYER

JENNI HERMOSO

The face of a movement

On the evening of August 20, 2023 at Stadium Australia in Sydney, Jenni Hermoso stood at the very top of the football world. At 33 years of age, 12 years after she had made her international debut, she had accomplished her greatest dream of World Cup success with Spain. Over the coming days, her name would grace newspapers and be talked about all over the world, and would become the most searched name on Google from Malta and Portugal, to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uruguay.

Hermoso started every World Cup match for Spain, covered more distance than any other player in the tournament, made the second-most successful dribbles and created the second-most chances. With Aitana Bonmati, she scored the joint-most goals for Spain (three), and was named the tournament's second-best player after her team-mate.

The moment the referee blew that whistle in Sydney was probably the best of Hermoso's entire career. A career that has seen her play for six different clubs in four different countries and two different continents, and win a host of team and individual honours. International glory was the only thing missing from her CV; now she was part of Spain's first-ever World Cup triumph.

But none of those achievements were mentioned in the following days. Instead, she became the involuntary protagonist of a situation she had no control of.

As Hermoso walked onto the podium to receive her winners' medal, the then-president of the Spanish Football Federation Luis Rubiales decided to plant a kiss on the player's lips. The images were shown all over the world. Hermoso later expressed that she had not liked it. She soon found herself in the middle of a global media storm. "I had to assume the consequences of an act that I did not provoke, that I had not chosen or premeditated," she later told *GQ* magazine. "I have received threats, and that is something you never get used to."

Despite what Hermoso described – in a statement released just days after the incident – as "continuous pressure to make a statement that could justify Mr. Luis Rubiales' actions", she did not shy away, saying she "would not make any individual or joint statements on this matter."

For decades, the Spanish players had pointed to a sexist and unprofessional structure within the national team, but their voices had mostly been ignored.

In the months leading up to last summer's World Cup, the Spanish players once again found themselves fighting for their rights, and again felt ignored. Winning the World Cup, in addition to the incident with Rubiales, meant the Spanish federation could no longer ignore their players.

"I don't fight for status, or to make more money," Hermoso told *GQ*. "Being able to fight for [more dignified conditions for female football players] is a source of pride and that is where I really want to be noticed."

She didn't plan to become the face of a movement – and after what happened in Sydney she has been working with a psychologist in order not to break down – but she has also made sure to use the spotlight she's been put in to ensure that future generations will have more dignified conditions and better opportunities.

Alexandra Jonson

World Cup winner ...Jenni Hermoso

> "I had to assume the consequences of an act that I did not provoke, that I had not chosen or premeditated"
>
> Jenni Hermoso

MANAGER

LUCIANO **SPALLETTI**

Napoli's *Scudetto*-winning coach who guided Italy to Euro 2024

When Luciano Spalletti sits down to write his memoirs, if he ever does, the chances are that he will reserve a special chapter for the year 2023. For this was the year when the 64-year-old had a doubly important impact on the national game, first leading Napoli to a memorable third league title success and then concluding his *annus mirabilis* by guiding Italy to a desperately wanted, late qualification for Euro 2024.

Spalletti's 2023 began on a positive note with his Napoli out in front, setting a blistering pace in Serie A. By January, Napoli's high-octane football had *Scudetto* written all over it with a third league title – their first since the legendary days of club icon Argentine Diego Maradona 33 years earlier – seemingly on the way.

Napoli did not ease off but rode off into the sunset with such dominance that by the end of March it was simply a question of when, not if, they would wrap up the title. Their final winning tally of 90 points, an astonishing 16 clear of second-placed Internazionale, is no exaggeration – they simply were that much better than the rest.

And then came a huge surprise. Even before the joyous celebrations for the league title had finished, it became clear that Spalletti would not be staying at the club. By the end of May, the introspective Spalletti was telling the media: "If you cannot give these fans what they want, then it is time to draw your own conclusions".

Did Spalletti leave because he had had one difference of opinion too many with his not always tranquil boss, Napoli owner and cinema producer Aurelio De Laurentiis? Or had he come to the conclusion that after an extraordinary season of high-energy, pressurised football, his Napoli squad would have difficulty producing anything like the same consistently superlative football? Certainly the disappointing start made by Spalletti's replacement, Frenchman Rudi Garcia, sacked by Napoli in early November, having lost four of his first 12 games, proves that point.

***Scudetto* winner... Luciano Spalletti**

Before we even had time to "riddle out" Spalletti's motivation, however, more drama had changed the course of things as Italy boss Roberto Mancini resigned in mid-August before taking over the Saudi Arabia national team. The Italian Football Federation, like just about everyone else, was caught unawares by Mancini's move but moved quickly to appoint the man of the moment, namely Spalletti.

Called in just days before vital Euro 2024 qualifiers against North Macedonia and Ukraine in September, Spalletti managed to pick up the pieces, patch together a team that won three, drew two and lost one (to group winners England), scraping through as runners-up. The sporting Gods, too, were much on the *Azzurri's* side. In their final group game, a 0-0 draw "away" to Ukraine in Leverkusen, their opponents were denied a seemingly clear stoppage-time penalty.

So, rather than living out a quiet sabbatical year, Spalletti was back in the hot seat, big time. On the night of Italy's not wholly convincing qualification, he suggested that from now on there could be some fun up the road for Italy. Come the summer, will he be a major protagonist in Germany? As of now, though, Spalletti would argue that his 2023 "Year of the Double" represents a year's good work.

Paddy Agnew

Even before the joyous celebrations for the league title had finished, it became clear that Spalletti would not be staying

MANAGER

FERNANDO DINIZ

A hero for Fluminense, but the jury is still out on his Brazil tenure

For Fernando Diniz it was the best of years, it was the worst of years. After a decade of being the great Brazilian coaching hope, 2023 was the season when Diniz finally made the breakthrough and won some silverware. But it was also the year when he took charge of a Brazil team which deservedly accumulated an unprecedented run of bad results in World Cup qualification. This was, then, a contradictory year for a fascinating figure.

With a respectable career as a midfielder with some of Brazil's biggest clubs, Diniz was a talented player. But he was not a happy one. He grew to despise the atmosphere of football, the way it chewed up its players and spat them out as commodities. In the second act of his life he resolved to be different. As well as training as a coach he studied psychology, and he doubled down on his way of doing things.

His teams played out from the back and sought to keep possession. But he always rejected any comparison with Pep Guardiola. There was nothing "positional" about what he was doing, no set division of the pitch into zones. His football was much more off the cuff, based on a belief that the players were capable of more, of taking quick decisions for themselves. In an environment where the other coaches were pragmatists, the teams of Diniz stood out for their bold approach.

But not for their results. He bounced around from club to club, getting jobs far more on promise than reality – until the current spell with Fluminense. In 2022 he built the team that came good the following season. The jewel in the crown was Fluminense's first Copa Libertadores title at the start of November. But even more joyous was the Rio State title back in April when, after losing the first leg 2-0, his side overcame local giants Flamengo 4-1 in a staggering second leg. It was classic Diniz – the left-back popping up on the right wing, elaborate passing movements with almost the entire team pulled over towards one side of the field, and soon afterwards Fluminense inflicted the heaviest defeat River Plate have ever suffered in the Libertadores – a 5-1 win in Rio.

Fernando Diniz... the best of years, the worst of years

But with the national team, it was Diniz who was suffering the defeats. His Brazil were already looking shaky after three rounds (six matchdays) of qualification when they went down to Uruguay, Colombia and Argentina.

The whole thing came across as an exercise in hubris – not least the decision to take the job while also staying with Fluminense. Officially he was a stand-in for Carlo Ancelotti. But he immediately made it clear that he was not part of anyone else's process and that he had never been assistant to anyone. In effect he appeared to be setting himself up as a rival to Ancelotti, and his opening words – "there's every chance of this turning out well" – were the declaration of a man who may well have read too much of his own publicity.

With no experience of the level, no time to train and little time to follow the fortunes of most of his players, problems were all but inevitable. The road would certainly seem to be clear for Ancelotti if he wants the job. But whatever happens there is surely plenty still to come from Fernando Diniz.

Tim Vickery

> The jewel in the crown was Fluminense's first Copa Libertadores title at the start of November. But even more joyous was the Rio State title back in April

MANAGER

URS FISCHER

Union Berlin's legendary former manager who flew too close to the sun

Why did so few fans of Bundesliga fairy-tale club Union Berlin call for the head of coach Urs Fischer when their side began the current campaign in free-fall, failing to register a win in 14 competitive games, including 13 defeats? The answer boils down to one word: faith. Faith in the human qualities of their Swiss boss, his modest, no-frills approach to his craft and the shrewd methods which, over five seasons, transformed second-tier no-hopers into Champions League participants. A banner held up at the Stadion An der Alten Forsterei a few months ago encapsulated local feelings: "Urs Fischer. Our Trainer – Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow."

Inevitably, however, the harsh realities of the football business would have the last word. With results so poor, a parting of the ways was always likely and in mid-November the news broke that Fischer had left by mutual consent. "Urs Fischer didn't resign, nor was he sacked," insisted club president Dirk Zingler.

While new Union boss Nenad Bjelica, once at the helm of Austria Vienna and Dinamo Zagreb, faces the complicated task of plotting a course away from the Bundesliga relegation zone, at least the supporters in the Kopenick district of south-east Berlin have the wonderfully vivid memories of the Fischer era. A succession of miracles on a shoestring budget: promotion to the German top flight in his inaugural season in charge (2018-19); comfortable survival in their first-ever Bundesliga term; qualification for the UEFA Conference League and Europa League and, last but not least, the magnum opus of last season – earning a Champions League spot via a fourth-place domestic league finish.

Cynics invariably used to laugh at the beginning of every Bundesliga season, when Fischer would solemnly declare that the team's one and only goal was to avoid the demotion trapdoor. Given what is transpiring at the moment, we know now that he was being deadly serious.

Our Trainer – Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow... Urs Fischer

When Fischer's Union, a side composed of journeymen, free transfers and cast-offs, were firing on all cylinders, they made the game seem so easy. Meticulously organised defensively, superb on the counter-attack and relentlessly mining the seam of crosses and second-ball dominance, Union often were too much for opponents to handle. Too tough, too resilient, too energetic, too cohesive. Revelling in the role of underdog, they would simply outrun and smother more technically gifted opponents.

All was to change, though, with the qualification for the Champions League last spring. Thanks to increased amounts in the coffers, a raft of high-profile players arrived last summer, including two German internationals, wing-back Robin Gosens and striker Kevin Volland, as well as Italy centre-back Leonardo Bonucci. The on-field prestige quotient went up, but somehow the soul of this over-achieving group of warriors was lost.

Union's best-ever coach is no more. But never will Urs Fischer be forgotten. "No Union fan would have dreamt of hearing the Champions League hymn at our ground," recently declared former Union midfielder Torsten Mattuschka. "We'll be talking about Urs here in 100 years' time."

Nick Bidwell

> **"We'll be talking about Urs here in 100 years' time"**
>
> Former Union Berlin midfielder Torsten Mattuschka

MANAGER

JONATAN GIRALDEZ

The brains behind Barcelona Femeni's dominant year

Much like a young footballer taught to play in various positions to better understand the game as a whole, the Galician-born Jonatan Giraldez had an all-encompassing football education before joining Lluis Cortes' coaching staff as a Barcelona Femeni technical assistant in 2019.

Giraldez studied sports science in Pontevedra and then Barcelona, worked as an analyst, fitness coach and coach at youth level for the Catalan Football Federation in both men's and women's football, and has lectured at university and worked as a TV football commentator. All that has led the 32-year-old to where he is now: head coach of the best women's club team in the world.

His success since taking over from Cortes as head coach in 2021 has been unprecedented. His first season ended with 30 wins out of 30 in the league and a domestic treble of the Primera Division, Copa de la Reina and Spanish Super Cup, while finishing runners-up to Lyon in the Champions League final.

The 2022-23 season began in much the same fashion; Barca won their first 20 league matches to make Giraldez the first coach in men or women's professional football to win their first 50 league games in charge of a club.

Yet 2023 didn't get off to the best start. In January, Barca were kicked out of the Copa de la Reina for fielding an ineligible player in the 9-0 thrashing of Osasuna. Giraldez protested that he didn't realise Geyse Ferreira was suspended for the game, but to no avail.

The Super Cup was retained comfortably enough with wins over Real Madrid and Real Sociedad, while the league rarely looked in doubt; their only blemishes – a draw at Sevilla and a 2-1 loss against Madrid CFF – came in May when the title was already won.

Those results brought to an end their league winning streak at 62 games – surpassing Arrigo Sacchi's record of 58 games unbeaten with Milan between 1991 and 1993 – but that was a price worth paying to secure the top prize: the Champions League.

Barca Femeni boss ...Jonatan Giraldez

"Sometimes you win and other times you learn," Giraldez said after the 3-1 defeat to Lyon in the 2022 final, and he was proven right in the 2023 final against Wolfsburg.

For the second year in a row, Barca trailed at half-time. But drawing on their experience of 2022, and with some tactical tweaks from Giraldez, they rallied to score three second-half goals and win the match.

For 18 Barca players there was little time to celebrate as they flew straight over to Australia and New Zealand for the World Cup (indeed, with so many of them involved in Spain's victory, Giraldez could claim a significant hand in the *Copa Mundial* triumph). Certainly the tournament was a disruption for Giraldez, with nine of his players involved in the final, including two for England.

Yet it doesn't appear to have hampered the reigning Spanish champions. Their 5-0 thrashing of Real Madrid in November's took them to 25 wins from 27 league games in 2023, scoring 108 goals in the process. Meanwhile, the defence of their Champions League crown began with a 5-0 group-stage victory over Benfica in what was Giraldez's 100th game in charge of the team. You'll struggle to find a better debut century in football management.

Jared Tinslay

The first coach in men or women's professional football to win their first 50 league games in charge of a club

FAREWELL TO...

Mohamed Al Fayed
The chairman and owner of Fulham between 1997 and 2013.

Amancio
A member of Real Madrid's European Cup-winning side of 1966, the right-winger won nine La Liga titles at the Bernabeu as well as the 1964 European Championship with Spain.

Christian Atsu
The Ghana and Hatayspor winger was one of the victims of the earthquake that devastated Turkey and Syria in February.

Clive Barker
Coach of South Africa's Africa Cup of Nations-winning side of 1996.

Chris Bart-Williams
Ex-midfielder for Sheffield Wednesday, Nottingham Forest and Charlton Athletic.

Silvio Berlusconi
The owner of Milan from 1986 until 2017, overseeing five European Cup victories.

Miroslav Blazevic
Croatia's coach at France '98 when they finished third in their first appearance at the World Cup as an independent nation.

Craig Brown
The last manager to qualify Scotland for a World Cup – the 1998 finals in France.

Antonio Carbajal
The first-ever player to appear at five World Cups, playing in goal for Mexico between the 1950 and 1966 finals.

Ernesto Castano
A former Juventus captain and Italy's sweeper when they won the 1968 Euros.

Bobby Charlton
Considered the finest English footballer of all time. An integral player in England's 1966 World Cup win and Manchester United's European Cup victory in 1968.

Roberto Dinamite
Dinamite holds the all-time goal records in the Rio State Championship and the Brazilian national championship, as well as for his club Vasco da Gama.

England's greatest ...Bobby Charlton

Just Fontaine
A record-breaking World Cup goalscorer whose plundering of 13 goals at the 1958 finals remains the highest-ever tally.

Trevor Francis
Britain's first-ever £1 million footballer when he joined Nottingham Forest, and went on to score the winning goal for them in the 1979 European Cup final.

Chris Garland
A member of the so-called "Ashton Gate Eight", the group of Bristol City players that tore up their contracts in order to save the club from liquidation.

Ruud Geels
Ex-Ajax, Feyenoord and PSV striker who was the Eredivisie's top scorer five times.

Kalman Gerencseri
Ligue 1's youngster-ever player, making his debut for Lens at the age of 15 years, seven months and 12 days in 1960.

David Gold
The former co-owner of Birmingham City and West Ham United, along with his business partner David Sullivan.

John Hollins
Only four players have ever played more games for Chelsea than Hollins.

Horst-Dieter Hottges
Werder Bremen's record Bundesliga appearance maker for an outfield player, who won the league title in 1964-65.

Salif Keita
In 1970, the ex-Saint-Etienne and Mali striker became the inaugural winner of the African Footballer of the Year award.

Scotland hero ...Craig Brown

World Cup record holder...Just Fontaine

World Soccer Player of the Year 1995... Gianluca Vialli

Bill Kenwright
Everton's long-serving chairman.

Francis Lee
Won the First Division title in his first season at Manchester City in 1967-68, before hitting the winner in the 1970 European Cup Winners' Cup final.

Giovanni Lodetti
A two-time European Cup winner with Milan, and a part of Italy's European Championship-winning squad of 1968.

Modeste M'Bami
A member of Cameroon's gold medal-winning side at the 2000 Olympics.

Ernesto Mastrangelo
Striker who won the Copa Libertadores with Boca Juniors in 1977 and 1978.

Gordon McQueen
Uncompromising centre-half for Leeds United, Manchester United and Scotland.

John Motson
Iconic commentator and one of the true voices of football in the UK.

Ferran Olivella
Captain of Spain's 1964 European Championship-winning team.

Zvonimir "Rale" Rasic
The coach who guided Australia to their first-ever World Cup in 1974.

Henri Stambouli
Coach of Marseille in the mid-1990s, before going on to manage the national teams of Guinea, Mali and Togo.

Luis Suarez
The first Spaniard to win the Ballon d'Or after inspiring Barcelona to the La Liga title in 1960. He was runner-up for the award four years later after becoming a European champion with both his club, Internazionale, and his country.

Gianluca Vialli
Serie A winner (Sampdoria), Champions League winner (Juventus), FA Cup winner (Chelsea) and a Euro 2020 winner with Italy as a member of Roberto Mancini's backroom staff. Voted *World Soccer*'s World Player of the Year in 1995.

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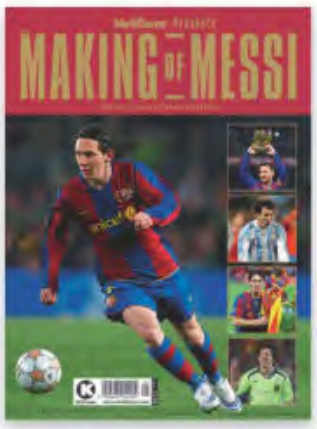

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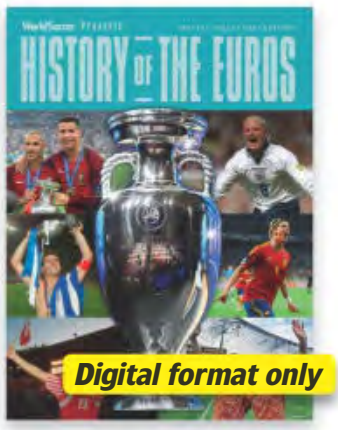

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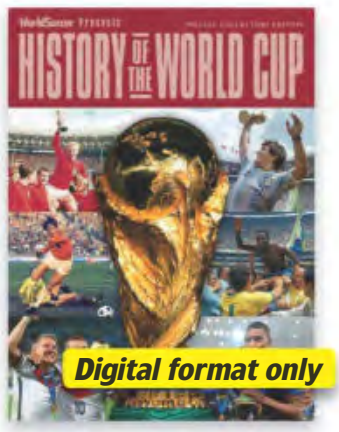

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The race to Abidjan

Six months later than planned, AFCON 2023 is ready to begin with a number of countries going to the Ivory Coast dreaming of glory

Morocco's ground-breaking march to the semi-finals of the World Cup in Qatar this time last year makes them the favourites for success at the Africa Cup of Nations finals in the Ivory Coast, even if the North African country has a spotty record at the continental championship.

Morocco became the first African and Arab nation to go as far as the final four of a World Cup in a major fillip for the African game and have since beaten Brazil, albeit in a friendly international at home, to further enhance their credentials.

Yet this will not be the first time that Morocco have arrived at a Cup of Nations finals in sparkling form and hotly tipped for success. The fact that they have failed to add to their solitary African crown, won way back 1976, shows that they have often failed to live up to the billing.

In both 2012 and 2013, they arrived as favourites but failed to get past the group stage. Their best showings in the last decade came when they reached the quarter-finals, in 2017 and again in 2021, either side of a run to the last 16 in 2019.

Ending a wait of nearly 50 years for a second title is a top priority for Morocco's coach Walid Regragui, his players and the overly ambitious football federation of the North African country, who are to host the Cup of Nations in 2025 and co-host the World Cup in 2030.

Favoured status does not guarantee anything at the African championship as many hot tips have discovered over the years. To be fair, there are several strong candidates to lift the trophy on February 11.

Half of the 24-team field for this Africa Cup of Nations have previously won the competition, making it a formidable line-up, even if some countries are long past their glory days.

The likes of defending champions Senegal, Algeria, Egypt and the Ivorian hosts all have strong credentials, with Cameroon and Ghana not to be discounted even if their squads are not as strong as previous editions.

Nigeria had appeared to be the standout candidates to seize the occasion and take the trophy until November, when they made a disastrous start to the 2026 World Cup qualifiers, held to 1-1 draws by both Lesotho and Zimbabwe. It's anyone's guess what Nigeria can deliver; on paper they look to have their best side in years, yet recent results do not back that up.

Home hopes will be high given the potential in the Ivory Coast squad.

Up for grabs... the AFCON trophy during the draw

Pitch doubts... inside the Alassane Ouattara stadium in Ebimpe, Abidjan

There are several strong candidates to lift the trophy on February 11

STADIUMS

Alassane Ouattara Stadium
Abidjan (60,000)
Stade de la Paix
Bouake (40,000)
Felix Houphouet Boigny Stadium
Abidjan (33,000)
Amadou Gon Coulibaly Stadium
Korhogo (20,000)
Charles Konan Banny Stadium
Yamoussoukro (20,000)
Laurent Pokou Stadium
San-Pedro (20,000)

They have got past the first round in all but one of their last nine successive finals appearances and, although the era of Didier Drogba and Yaya Toure and company is gone, they have the likes of Serge Aurier, Franck Kessie, Ibrahim Sangare and Sebastien Haller contributing considerable experience alongside emerging youngsters like Evan Ndicka, Abakar Sylla and teenager striker Karim Konate who could make an impact.

The hosts have put considerable resources into the tournament, with new stadiums built in Abidjan, Korhogo, San-Pedro and Yamoussoukro, but there is plenty of concern over the quality of the pitches with the Confederation of African Football desperate to avoid the problems they had with the playing surfaces in Cameroon at the last tournament. Previously, many matches in the early stages of the Cup of Nations have proven to be a hard watch and do not need the added impediment of a poor-quality pitch.

Several senior government officials were sacked in September after the friendly international between the Ivory Coast and Mali had to be abandoned because of a waterlogged pitch at the new Alassane Ouattara Stadium in Abidjan's Ebimpe neighbourhood. The showcase venue is to host the opening match and the final and there have been frantic efforts to ensure it is in proper condition by the time the tournament begins to avoid any repeat embarrassment. Those going there must, however, contend with mind-numbing traffic congestion as it lies to the north of Abidjan with a single approach road. The trip back to the capital after matches can take several hours.

The rain is the reason the tournament was put back six months and now falls in the middle of the European league season, forcing many players to face the irritation of their club coaches. CAF had previously promised never to again put the players in a situation where they were forced to choose between club and country but have now twice gone back on their word.

The last host nation to win a Cup of Nations finals was Egypt in 2006, ironically edging the Ivorians on penalties in the final in Cairo. There have been eight editions since without home success, something the Ivory Coast will be heavily conscious of.

SCHEDULE

GROUP A

	3	**Ivory Coast v Guinea-Bissau** Alassane Ouattara Stadium
a	4	**Nigeria v Equatorial Guinea** Alassane Ouattara Stadium
a	8	**Equatorial Guinea v Guinea-Bissau** Alassane Ouattara Stadium
a	8	**Ivory Coast v Nigeria** Alassane Ouattara Stadium
a	22	**Guinea-Bissau v Nigeria** Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium
a	22	**Equatorial Guinea v Ivory Coast** Alassane Ouattara Stadium

GROUP B

Jan 14	**Egypt v Mozambique** Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium
Jan 14	**Ghana v Cape Verde** Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium
Jan 18	**Egypt v Ghana** Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium
Jan 19	**Cape Verde v Mozambique** Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium
Jan 22	**Cape Verde v Egypt** Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium
Jan 22	**Mozambique v Ghana** Alassane Ouattara Stadium

GROUP C

Jan 15	**Senegal v Gambia** Charles Konan Banny Stadium
Jan 15	**Cameroon v Guinea** Charles Konan Banny Stadium
Jan 19	**Senegal v Cameroon** Charles Konan Banny Stadium
Jan 19	**Guinea v Gambia** Charles Konan Banny Stadium
Jan 23	**Guinea v Senegal** Charles Konan Banny Stadium
Jan 23	**Gambia v Cameroon** Stade de la Paix

GROUP D

Jan 15	**Algeria v Angola** Stade de la Paix
Jan 16	**Burkina Faso v Mauritania** Stade de la Paix
Jan 20	**Algeria v Burkina Faso** Stade de la Paix
Jan 20	**Mauritania v Angola** Stade de la Paix
Jan 23	**Mauritania v Algeria** Stade de la Paix
Jan 23	**Angola v Burkina Faso** Charles Konan Banny Stadium

GROUP E

6	**Tunisia v Namibia** Amadou Gon Coulibaly Stadium
6	**Mali v South Africa** Amadou Gon Coulibaly Stadium
20	**Tunisia v Mali** Amadou Gon Coulibaly Stadium
21	**South Africa v Namibia** Amadou Gon Coulibaly Stadium
Jan 24	**Namibia v Mali** Laurent Pokou Stadium
Jan 24	**South Africa v Tunisia** Amadou Gon Coulibaly Stadium

GROUP F

Jan 17	**Morocco v Tanzania** Laurent Pokou Stadium
Jan 17	**DR Congo v Zambia** Laurent Pokou Stadium
Jan 21	**Morocco v DR Congo** Laurent Pokou Stadium
Jan 21	**Zambia v Tanzania** Laurent Pokou Stadium
Jan 24	**Tanzania v DR Congo** Amadou Gon Coulibaly Stadium
Jan 24	**Zambia v Morocco** Laurent Pokou Stadium

ROUND OF 16

(1)	Jan 27	**Winner D v 3rd B/E/F**	Stade de la Paix
(2)	Jan 27	**Runner-up A v Runner-up C**	Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium
(3)	Jan 28	**Winner A v 3rd C/D/E**	Alassane Ouattara Stadium
(4)	Jan 28	**Runner-up B v Runner-up F**	Laurent Pokou Stadium
(5)	Jan 29	**Winner B v 3rd A/C/D**	Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium
(6)	Jan 29	**Winner C v 3rd A/B/F**	Charles Konan Banny Stadium
(7)	Jan 30	**Winner E v Runner-up D**	Amadou Gon Coulibaly Stadium
(8)	Jan 30	**Winner F v Runner-up E**	Laurent Pokou Stadium

QUARTER-FINALS

(9)	Feb 2	**Winner match 2 v winner match 1**	Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium
(10)	Feb 2	**Winner match 4 v winner match 3**	Alassane Ouattara Stadium
(11)	Feb 3	**Winner match 7 v winner match 6**	Stade de la Paix
(12)	Feb 3	**Winner match 5 v winner match 8**	Charles Konan Banny Stadium

SEMI-FINALS

(13)	Feb 7	**Winner match 9 v Winner match 12**	Stade de la Paix
(14)	Feb 7	**Winner match 11 v Winner match 10**	Alassane Ouattara Stadium

THIRD PLACE PLAY-OFF

(15)	Feb 10	Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium

FINAL

(16)	Feb 11	Alassane Ouattara Stadium

Facetoface

WALID REGRAGUI

"All the teams from pots one and two are contenders"

Morocco's head coach believes the upcoming Africa Cup of Nations could be the most competitive ever

Does Morocco's success at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar make your team the hot favourites for the Africa Cup of Nations title?
Of course, we are among the favourites, but often we have not been up to the task! It can be mental, it can be caused by many other factors. Maybe the fact that we have struggled to win the junior African titles at Under-17 and Under-20 level explains part of it. Many players have only gained tournament experience as seniors at the Africa Cup of Nations. But now, Morocco are the Under-23 African champions and this generation will have a certain experience in the future – just like Egypt, Ghana, Senegal and Nigeria, where all the young talents are used to that type of competition. This is one of our main targets, as Moroccan national teams, to reach and win African titles in all categories.

But a lot of your players will have experience from two World Cups behind them as they head to the Ivory Coast...
It's true that we have participated at the last two World Cup finals, and that has given us the experience of the big competitions. But for Morocco, the reality is that the Cup of Nations is always a complicated tournament. This is not the first time Morocco will arrive as favourites and a potential winner. Before almost every finals, we are among the favourites for the title. But, unfortunately, we have not managed to be regularly among the last four in this tournament. Our last final was back in 2004 – that was 20 years ago! But our group of players is young and I think they passed a milestone during the last Cup of Nations in Cameroon. It's up to us to show that we will use this experience in the Ivory Coast.

What is the secret to making a squad peak at the right time at a tournament, like you did with Morocco in Qatar?
A secret, what secret? If there was one, we would have used it in previous Cup of Nations! Now we cross our fingers that our main players will avoid injuries before the competition. That would disrupt both the programme and the team. We need to have all our important players, physically and mentally, available to make our backbone as solid as possible. But you know as well that the first games at the finals can give the rhythm, the tempo to see whether the team has the capacity to go on to win the tournament. Once again, the main fear for a coach is to lose players because of injuries before the tournament.

Do you expect the facilities, hotels, training grounds, etc. in the Ivory Coast to be different to Qatar? How will you get your players to adapt?
Every organising country has its own specificities, I guess. Qatar is Qatar, Ivory Coast is Ivory Coast. We went there in October especially to play a friendly game, to see the stadium, the pitch, the training pitches and so forth. As I said after the game against their national team, the conditions will be optimal. It is also a friendly country, which gave us a warm welcome. It surely will be one of the best Cup of Nations finals in history, not only because of the participating nations but also in terms of organisation. Moroccans won't look to that aspect for an excuse!

Which other teams do you think can win this Cup of Nations tournament?
I think the participating nations form one of the best, if not the best, field of teams that we've ever seen at a Cup of Nations. Honestly, all the teams from pots one and two at the draw can be viewed as possible contenders. And as you know, there is always a surprise in every competition, as we were in Qatar.

What are your own memories of the Cup of Nations, especially reaching the final in 2004 when you were in the Moroccan defence against hosts Tunisia?
It's a good memory, but also a bad one. When we look back at our journey in 2004, we wanted to bring the cup back home for the second time but we couldn't do it unfortunately. But in human terms, it was a great tournament, a superb final. It remains in our football history as such. We received a warm welcome from our people when we got home – just like what we received from our people after the 2022 World Cup. But, if there was a negative point, we did not come back as winners.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

Compiled by Mark Gleeson

GROUP A

Host nation ...Ivory Coast

Glut of attacking talent...Nigeria

IVORY COAST
(2 AFCON wins, last in 2015)

Three players – Serge Aurier, Eric Bailly and Max Gradel – who won the 2015 AFCON remain active with the national team and are likely to make the squad for this tournament.

It was the second time that the Ivorians had won the top prize in Africa, following their first success in 1992, and ironically came after Didier Drogba had finished his international career. He was the pivot of a "golden generation" that went to three successive World Cups and came close to continental glory but was never able to deliver, before Yaya Toure captained the side to a dramatic penalty-shootout win over Ghana in the 2015 final.

There is much potential in their current squad and high hopes that come with hosting the tournament, although they will have to deal with a massive burden of expectation.

KEY PLAYER

Seko Fofana

Debuted in 2017 after switching allegiance from France, although his cap tally has only just passed into double figures. His presence is a massive boost.

THE COACH

Jean-Louis Gasset

A former assistant coach of France and also head coach at Montpellier, Bordeaux and Saint-Etienne. Took the Ivorian job in May 2022.

EQUATORIAL GUINEA
(0 AFCON wins)

Ever more reliant on their Spanish-born contingent, *Nzalang Nacional* continue to punch above their weight by cleverly using the diaspora in their former colonial power, finding players to such an extent that they are unlikely to have more than one home-based player in their squad.

This will be their fourth Cup of Nations finals appearance. The first two were as hosts but they have now qualified through the preliminaries for two successive finals.

At the last AFCON in Cameroon, they pulled off one of the great shocks by eliminating defending champions Algeria in the groups, then knocked out Mali in the last 16.

They won four out of six qualifiers for this edition to finish second behind continental giants Tunisia on head-to-head results only, further proof of their growing strength.

KEY PLAYER

Federico Bikoro

The Cameroon-born midfielder, nicknamed "Sisinio", has been a consistent force for Equatorial Guinea. Recently moved to Club Africain in Tunisia.

THE COACH

Juan Micha

A former international forward who came through the coaching ranks at the federation, moving up from the junior and women's teams.

GUINEA-BISSAU
(0 AFCON wins)

For one of Africa's poorest countries, a fourth successive qualification for the Cup of Nations finals is an extraordinary achievement, on the back of consistency in the coaching department and picking players from Europe who have some sort of heritage with the West African nation.

Nicknamed *Djurtus* (wild dogs), they are yet to win a game at the finals, drawing three and losing six of their nine previous matches at the 2017, 2019 and 2021 finals. But they are now a confident force in the African game, upsetting Nigeria away in the qualifiers and finishing second behind the Super Eagles, who they'll meet once again here.

They are continually looking for new players who have connections to the country, recently adding the Senegal-born, Spanish-raised Bolton winger Carlos Mendes Gomes.

KEY PLAYER

Mama Balde

On loan at Lyon from Troyes, the bulky striker is a Sporting academy graduate. This will be his third AFCON finals.

THE COACH

Baciro Cande

Coach for seven years until 2010, then returned to the post in 2016 to become a national hero as they head to another finals under him.

NIGERIA
(3 AFCON wins, last in 2013)

As the continent's most populous nation, Nigeria's return of three titles in 19 AFCON appearances would suggest that they have underachieved, but they have been a top-four finisher 15 times.

Their last appearance at the finals in Cameroon saw them crash out in the round of 16, upset by a poor Tunisian team, and the ramifications means the side is much refreshed some 24 months on.

There is a sudden glut of superb attacking talent available to them, which will make the Super Eagles a force to contend with in what will be familiar conditions for them, but concerns in other departments that gives them an air of inconsistency.

Their previous AFCON triumphs were at home (1980), in Tunisia (1994) and South Africa (2013).

KEY PLAYER

Victor Osimhen

The first African to finish as top scorer in Serie A and also topped the qualification scoring charts with ten goals.

THE COACH

Jose Peseiro

The 63-year-old managed Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, and had spells in Portugal, before taking on the Super Eagles after the last Cup of Nations. Under pressure after a poor start to World Cup qualifying.

Seven-time winners...Egypt

Antoine Semenyo ...one of Ghana's Premier League contingent

CAPE VERDE
(0 AFCON wins)

A nation with a population under 600,000 will be competing at the Cup of Nations for a fourth time, having got past the group phase twice on the last three occasions.

Cape Verde benefit from a major diaspora with expat communities in France, the Netherlands, Portugal and the US from which they draw their players, some of whom can barely speak or understand the local Creole or Portuguese, the islands' official language.

They qualified behind Burkina Faso and will be looking to replicate their performance from the last finals, where they made the round of 16, albeit as one of the best third-placed finishers, before eventual winners Senegal eliminated them.

Their squad has been significantly refreshed from the last finals two years ago, with the addition of some promising new talent.

KEY PLAYER

Ryan Mendes

Cape Verde's most capped player turns 34 just ahead of the finals, but is still the first name on the team sheet.

THE COACH

Bubista

Full name Pedro Leitao Brito, he will hope to enjoy these finals more than 2021, when he had COVID-19 and missed two of his team's games.

EGYPT
(7 AFCON wins, last in 2010)

Africa's most successful football nation, with seven AFCON wins and a record number of appearances, are among the favourites again. They will be competing for the 26th time, having been denied the title two years ago in a penalty shootout defeat in the final against Senegal.

The Pharaohs are at something of a crossroads as their team is beginning to age and the process of blending in new players has proven less than seamless. But despite that they won five of their six qualifiers to reach the finals with ease.

Whether they are a 100-cap veteran or ten-cap upstart, almost all Egyptian players have a steely confidence on the big stage, which comes from their repeated success at club level, and can be expected to be at the business end again as they aim to assert their long-standing dominance on the African game.

KEY PLAYER

Mohamed Salah

Egypt's talisman moves closer to his 100th cap, but the AFCON has brought him only frustration, finishing a runner-up twice.

THE COACH

Rui Vitoria

The 53-year-old took over in July 2022 for his first international job after an extensive coaching career, including four years at Benfica.

GHANA
(4 AFCON wins, last in 1982)

The Black Stars had a horror Cup of Nations two years ago, suffering an embarrassing 3-2 defeat to tiny Comoros and being ignominiously sent home after the group stage.

Prior to that they had been consistently knocking on the door of success without being able to force it open. They were semi-finalists six times between 2008 (which they hosted) and 2017, finishing runners-up twice.

But it is now more than 40 years since they won their last AFCON title, when the teenager Abedi Pele was their precocious star. His sons Andre and Jordan Ayew return for these finals, perhaps their last with hopes of emulating their father. For Andre it will be a record-equalling eighth AFCON appearance, and for Ghana a 24th finals, which puts them second on the all-time list behind group opponents Egypt.

KEY PLAYER

Mohammed Kudus

With a strong international goal record and improvement in his club form at West Ham, Kudus could prove one of Ghana's key men.

THE COACH

Chris Hughton

Hughton was Ghana's technical advisor at the last World Cup, and took over as head coach after Qatar.

MOZAMBIQUE
(0 AFCON wins)

Nicknamed after a venomous snake, the "Mambas" might not have the necessary bite to prove effective at the finals, where they return for the first time since 2010 after securing their place on the last day of qualifying after edging out Benin 3-2 to qualify second in their group behind Senegal.

They will bring the oldest player to the finals in 40-year-old skipper Domingues, still dazzling with his wing play, and part of a motley collection of home-based talent mixed up with European-based professionals, mostly from lower leagues in Portugal and Germany.

Mozambique is where greats like Eusebio and Mario Coluna were born, but since independence in 1975 they have battled to make an impression on the African game and this will be only their fifth appearance at the finals, registering two draws and ten defeats in 12 previous matches.

KEY PLAYER

Geny Catamo

The 22-year-old has returned to Sporting after a loan at Maritimo and will be key to Mozambique's attack at the finals.

THE COACH

Chiquinho Conde

One of Mozambique's best-known players spent most of his career in Portugal. Coach since October 2021.

Compiled by Mark Gleeson

GROUP C

Always dangerous ...Cameroon

Defending champions...Senegal

CAMEROON
(5 AFCON wins, last in 2017)

The Indomitable Lions are nowhere near the heights that they used to command in the African game, but they still manage to carry an aura of confidence and invincibility and are always a dangerous foe.

This was the case in 2017 when they won the last of their five Cup of Nations titles in an unexpected triumph when they had a similar lack of quality in their squad but galvanised their fighting spirit, took advantage of lucky breaks and got better with each passing match.

Samuel Eto'o has since taken over as president of the football federation and, as well as appointing Rigobert Song as head coach in 2022, has looked to make things easier for the players and the team by getting rid of the foibles that used to dog him and his team-mates in their playing days.

KEY PLAYER

Andre Onana

Returned to the team in October after a spat with coach Song saw him leave the camp during the 2022 World Cup. Often a much-needed bulwark.

THE COACH

Rigobert Song

Holds the record for the most AFCON appearances as a player, featuring in eight and winning two of them, in 2000 and 2002.

GAMBIA
(0 AFCON wins)

Debutants at the last finals, the small West African nation caused a huge upset by reaching the quarter-finals at the first attempt, defeating Mauritania and Tunisia in the groups and then Guinea in the last 16.

Guinea are again opponents this time around and will be wary of what they are up against, with the Gambian side improving in ability and markedly more confident.

A dramatic last-gasp equaliser in their final qualifier against Congo ensured a place in the finals, despite having to play all their home games outside of the Gambia because of a lack of suitable stadia, making their achievement even more impressive.

They have been handed a really tough draw but they, and their head coach Tom Saintfiet, will relish the opportunity in the spotlight as well as their role as potential spoilers.

KEY PLAYER

Omar Colley

Defender who spent most of his club career in Serie A but now at Besiktas. Leads a side brimming with talent, and is an example of Gambia's potential.

THE COACH

Tom Saintfiet

Has coached ten different countries but Gambia has been his best work. One of five candidates for the 2023 African Coach of the Year award.

GUINEA
(0 AFCON wins)

Guinea finished second behind Egypt in their qualifying group to book a place in the finals for a 14th time, but not since 1976, when they were runners-up, have they been able to get past the quarter-finals.

In 2015 they made it to the last eight without winning a single game, drawing all three group clashes and then advancing ahead of Mali after a drawing of lots. They made it out of the group phase in each of the last two finals but were immediately eliminated in the round of 16.

It is hardly a record that suggests they can be a force, and in a tough group they will be fortunate to get into the knockout rounds, although they will arrive in the Ivory Coast with a handful of form players.

Sparse resources are a problem too, while a military coup has seen the West African nation forfeit home advantage in international matches.

KEY PLAYER

Serhou Guirassy

Won his first cap almost two years ago, after switching allegiance from France. Enjoying a prolific season for Stuttgart.

THE COACH

Kaba Diawara

The French-born Diawara played for Arsenal – and for Guinea at the 2006 AFCON finals. Now over two years into the job as head coach.

SENEGAL
(1 AFCON win, 2021)

The defending champions have a strong squad that finally delivered on its potential two years ago, albeit needing a penalty shootout to win their first-ever Cup of Nations title by edging out Egypt in the final.

They will be confident they can retain the trophy, although they'll get a good early test of their potential in a tough group. There is still much reliance on Sadio Mane, even if his form is nothing like it was two years ago, but other stars are emerging including Nicolas Jackson, Pape Matar Sarr and Ismailia Sarr.

The Lions of Teranga have plenty of tournament experience too, having progressed past the first round at the last World Cup in Qatar before England handed them a harsh lesson. Since then, they have beaten Brazil in a friendly in Lisbon to boost confidence.

KEY PLAYER

Sadio Mane

Although he's left the rigour and thrust of European football for Saudi Arabia, Mane is still his country's talisman. Recently won his 100th senior cap.

THE COACH

Aliou Cisse

Has coached Senegal at their last three AFCON finals, plus two World Cups. Captained them to the 2002 final where they lost to Cameroon.

Powerful squad...Algeria

Under the radar ...Burkina Faso

ALGERIA
(2 AFCON wins, last in 2019)

A powerful squad continues to evolve as more players are persuaded to join, but they have much atoning to do after flopping at the last finals when they were defending champions but lost to Equatorial Guinea and went home after the first round.

They looked set for a dominant spell after emerging well-deserved winners in 2019 but then fared poorly in the next tournament, plus were denied a place at the World Cup in Qatar by a last-minute goal for Cameroon just months later.

Often they are undone by the pressure of expectation, but there is no doubt about their quality and ability, and the Fennec Foxes are legitimate contenders as they look to add to their two previous titles in 1990 and 2019.

KEY PLAYER

Mohamed Amoura

The 23-year-old is Algeria's new striking option, having netted five times over the past 18 months and fired Union Saint-Gilloise to the top of the Belgian league table.

THE COACH

Djamel Belmadi

Lifted the trophy in 2019 – ten months after taking over as coach. Began his coaching career in Qatar, where he ended his playing days.

ANGOLA
(0 AFCON wins)

Resources have been tight for Angola, but they have players with the potential to cause an upset or two at the tournament in the Ivory Coast. The squad regularly get together in Portugal, where they have a large contingent of players, and hold training camps there.

They qualified second behind Ghana in Group E, holding off a spirited bid by the Central African Republic to claim their berth but also proved unlucky in losing their only group game in Ghana, giving up a goal six minutes into added time.

They first qualified for the finals in 1996, when they were among the first countries to actively seek out players in Europe with roots to the country to strengthen their side, and this will be their ninth appearance at the finals.

KEY PLAYER

Manuel Cafumana

Nicknamed "Show", the midfielder won his first cap aged 18. Has played in Angola, France, Portugal, Bulgaria and Israel.

THE COACH

Pedro Goncalves

An academy coach at Sporting, the 47-year-old went to Angola to work with Primeiro Agosto before being catapulted to the Angola U17 and senior national teams.

BURKINA FASO
(0 AFCON wins)

A country that always seems to slip under the radar, despite assembling a worthy record of being runners-up in 2013, third in 2017 and semi-finalists again in the last edition.

Practical resources are sometimes limited but there is no lack of playing talent, with the likes of Premier League stars Dango Ouattara and Bertrand Traore, meaning they will have the respect of their opponents.

Burkina Faso won their qualifying group, although it was a relatively easy task finishing ahead of Cape Verde, Togo and Eswatini, and are now competing at their 13th finals.

Their second group fixture versus Algeria in Bouake will mark their 50th match at the finals since they first participated in 1978 when the country was known as Upper Volta.

KEY PLAYER

Edmond Tapsoba

Now in his fifth season at Bayer Leverkusen and rated as one of the top defenders in African football. Had to sit out the first game of the last finals in Cameroon with COVID.

THE COACH

Hubert Velud

Shot in the arm when the Togo bus was attacked in Angola at the 2010 finals, and was axed just weeks before he was due to return to the AFCON with Sudan in 2021.

MAURITANIA
(0 AFCON wins)

This will be the third time in a row that Mauritania will compete at the finals, but they are still looking for their first victory. They will fancy their chances of getting something from this group and have been working hard on strengthening their squad with fresh talent from emigrant communities in Europe.

There was also the boost of the domestic champions FC Nouadhibou qualifying for the CAF Champions League group phase for the first time, offering more competitive football for the players, many of whom are also in the national team.

Mauritania booked their place in the Ivory Coast by finishing second in Group I ahead of Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's Gabon, who they beat 2-1 at home in their last decisive qualifier in September.

KEY PLAYER

Aboubakary Koita

The Sint-Truiden forward only won his first cap in November, but his addition is a real boost given his goalscoring form in Belgium.

THE COACH

Amir Abdou

The architect of Comoros' heroics at the last Cup of Nations, while at the same time already coaching Nouadhibou at club level. Took charge of Mauritania in 2022.

Mercurial talents ...South Africa

Model of consistency ...Tunisia

MALI
(0 AFCON wins)

Yet to win the Cup of Nations, but with the potential to do so, Mali will be a team that others will fear at this tournament as they return for a ninth successive finals appearance.

Their on-field achievements come in contrast to their chaotic administration. The president of the Malian football federation Mamatou Toure, who is also a FIFA Council member, is in jail after being accused of embezzling public funds and forgery – charges that he denies. But the team ploughs on despite all the turmoil and came close to a first-ever World Cup qualification for Qatar, losing narrowly to Tunisia in their play-off tie.

Mali responded by winning five of their six qualifiers for these finals, and will have plenty of support in Korhogo as it is some 150km from the Malian border.

KEY PLAYER

Mohamed Camara

A key player for both his country and Monaco in Ligue 1. Defensive midfielder with work-rate, tackling and the ability to drive the team on.

THE COACH

Eric Chelle

Born in Abidjan but won five caps for Mali. Appointed head coach in May 2022 fresh from spells in the French lower leagues.

NAMIBIA
(0 AFCON wins)

A long-running dispute between clubs and the football association meant there was no league in Namibia for several seasons, yet despite this lack of activity their majority home-based squad has managed to qualify for the finals.

They were helped by the fact that their qualifying group was reduced to three teams when Kenya were disqualified, so effectively they only needed to get the better of Burundi, but overachieved by taking four points off Cameroon. They were also forced to play their "home" games in Johannesburg because of the poor state of their stadia in Windhoek.

This will be their fourth Cup of Nations appearance and they are still looking for a first victory, having drawn two and lost seven of their nine previous matches. It is also the third time they share the same group with neighbours South Africa.

KEY PLAYER

Peter Shalulile

The 29-year-old is their captain and key man. Consistent scorer for South African champions Mamelodi Sundowns.

THE COACH

Collin Benjamin

One of Namibia's all-time greats. His coaching started as an assistant with the national team and he took over as head coach in mid-2022.

SOUTH AFRICA
(1 AFCON win, 1996)

Bafana Bafana won the AFCON on their debut showing in 1996, then finished runners-up in 1998 and third in 2000, but have never been able to hit the same heights since.

They missed out on the last edition in Cameroon, but in 2019 eliminated much-fancied hosts Egypt in the last 16 before being knocked out by Nigeria in the quarter-finals. It was typical of the mercurial nature of the side, brimming with talent but lacking a match-winning consistency.

The team was overhauled when Hugo Broos arrived as coach with an emphasis on only using young players, but this has not been the panacea the Belgian promised as South Africa struggled to overcome Liberia in their qualifying group to return for an 11th finals. They have the ability to upset teams if they can make the knockout stage.

KEY PLAYER

Themba Zwane

The 34-year-old attacker was deemed too old when Broos took over but his Mamelodi Sundowns form made him impossible to ignore.

THE COACH

Hugo Broos

A former Belgian international, the 71-year-old won the AFCON with a mediocre Cameroon side in 2017.

TUNISIA
(1 AFCON win, 2004)

This will be a record-extending 16th consecutive time that Tunisia compete at the finals – having not missed a tournament since hosting the event in 1994 – but they have won only once in all that time. They are a model of consistency, but only infrequently have they had enough depth in their squad to launch a credible challenge for honours.

At the last edition in Cameroon they got to the quarter-finals despite losing three of their five games. In their previous 15 appearances, they have advanced past the first round 11 times, finishing runners-up in 1996 and reaching the semis twice.

They return with most of the squad that went to the World Cup just over a year ago in Qatar where, although they did not advance past the first round, they pulled off a victory over finalists France.

KEY PLAYER

Ellyes Skhiri

Holding midfielder with a lung-busting capacity, he has not missed a match for Tunisia at the last two World Cups and past two AFCONS.

THE COACH

Jalel Kadri

Stepped up from assistant to coach after the last AFCON finals. Offered to resign after failing to get out of their World Cup group in Qatar.

Continental giants...DR Congo have underachieved

Big potential...Zambia

DR CONGO
(2 AFCON wins, last in 1974)

It is 50 years since the Leopards, then known as Zaire, enjoyed their last Africa Cup of Nations success, but they have overcome frustrating administrative inefficiency to return to the finals for a 20th time, having missed the last edition in Cameroon.

Increasingly they are turning to players of Congolese heritage born in Europe as there is no longer as fulsome a flow of talent from the once powerful domestic league, which is struggling amid tough economic times and endless civil strife in one of the continent's biggest countries. Given their resources, the Congolese are massive underachievers.

Since the 1974 success (the same year they went to the World Cup in West Germany), they've reached the semi-finals twice, in 1998 and 2015.

KEY PLAYER

Chancel Mbemba

Ex-Newcastle and Porto and now at Marseille. The captain can play in defence or as a holding midfielder, offering energy with his drive and determination.

THE COACH

Sebastien Desabre

The 47-year-old Frenchman has worked in the Ivory Coast, Algeria, Angola, Cameroon, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Uganda – the latter being his only other international job.

MOROCCO
(1 AFCON win, 1976)

The first African country to reach the World Cup semi-finals are now the favourites for the Cup of Nations, but it is almost five decades since their only success in the African championship. This could be their best chance yet, coming off the back of what they achieved in Qatar plus the confidence of beating Brazil.

There have been some interesting additions to the squad since Qatar, which have served to enhance competition for places, although stalwarts like Nayef Aguerd, Sofyan Amrabat, Yassine Bounou, Youssef En-Nesyri, Achraf Hakimi, Romain Saiss and Hakim Ziyech remain the backbone of the side.

The Atlas Lions won the Cup of Nations crown in 1976 and were runners-up in 2004. This will be their 19th tournament appearance, stretching back to their first in 1972.

KEY PLAYER

Tarik Tissoudali

A horror injury meant the nippy forward missed Qatar and most of last season, but he's now back to full fitness and hungry to make up for lost time.

THE COACH

Walid Regragui

Right-back in the last Moroccan side to reach the Cup of Nations final 20 years ago and is now a national icon after the Qatar World Cup.

TANZANIA
(0 AFCON wins)

The Taifa Stars went to the finals in 1980 and then waited almost 40 years for a second appearance. They will now compete for a third time after securing their place with a shock draw in Algeria in their final qualifier. They had to avoid defeat as the Algerians sought to finish with a 100 per cent record, but managed to force a 0-0 draw and thereby deny neighbours Uganda a place.

They will be seeking to improve their finals record of five defeats out of six, but they will be underdogs in the group – as proven by November's 2-0 defeat at home to Morocco in the 2026 World Cup qualifiers.

Tanzania's top two clubs, Simba and Young Africans, have become a force within the African game in recent years, but much of this has been on the back of imported stars.

KEY PLAYER

Simon Msuva

Imposing 30-year-old striker has more than 20 goals for Tanzania in almost 90 caps. Has got club experience in Morocco, Algeria and Saudi Arabia.

THE COACH

Adel Amrouche

The 55-year-old Algerian had a spell as general director at Union Saint-Gilloise and has been national team coach of Burundi, Kenya, Libya, Botswana and Yemen.

ZAMBIA
(1 AFCON win, 2012)

The 2012 champions missed out on the last three editions but qualified safely this time around and have the potential to prove disruptive in the Ivory Coast.

Zambia overcame the Ivorians in the 2012 final in Libreville, which was decided on penalties, and so will have few fans in the West African country, but will be happy to work without too much expectation.

There are now more Zambians playing club football in Europe than ever before and so the look of the team that was previously dominated by home-based talent, or players at clubs in DR Congo or South Africa, has changed.

This is their 18th appearance at the AFCON. They were runners-up in 1974 and 1994 and reached three further semi-finals.

KEY PLAYER

Patson Daka

The 25-year-old is getting little game time at Leicester, so this is an opportunity for him to show his wares and secure a move.

THE COACH

Avram Grant

Best known for his time at Chelsea, but this is actually his third national team job after Israel (2002-06) and Ghana, whom he led at the 2015 and 2017 AFCON finals.

Qatar takes centre stage again

Just over a year after the 2022 World Cup, the Gulf state is ready to host another major tournament

Asian Cup final host...the Lusail Iconic Stadium

Usually, the defending continental champions who then host the next tournament would be considered as a favourite to win once more, but Qatar will do well to win the 2023 Asian Cup in January. Instead, Japan are the clear frontrunners to lift the trophy. The Samurai Blue were Asia's most impressive representatives at the World Cup, progressing to the last 16 with victories over Germany and Spain, and any doubts that they are not still the best side in the continent have been dispelled by fine friendly results since.

Indeed, Japan won the tournament, for a record fourth time, when it was last hosted in Qatar back in 2011, defeating South Korea in an epic semi-final and then beating Australia in the final. Those two also reached the knockout stages of the last World Cup, with Australia, Asian Cup winners on home soil in 2015, giving eventual winners Argentina a run for their money. Korea, meanwhile, have not won since 1960 but, with the likes of Son Heung-min at Tottenham Hotspur, Kim Min-jae at Bayern Munich and Lee Kang-in at Paris Saint-Germain, they have a stellar cast of players that should see them go far.

The other two traditional powers in Asia have also gone far too long without the cup in their cabinets. The last time Iran won was back in 1976 and Team Melli is also packed full of talent even if there are concerns whether coach Amir Ghalenoei is the right man. Across the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia hired Roberto Mancini in August and while warm-up results have not been great, a fully domestic-based squad has ambitions of a first title since 1996.

Japan are the clear frontrunners to lift the trophy

All these six are at least familiar with the surroundings. Of the World Cup venues, the only one not being used again is Stadium 974 (unsurprisingly, given that it was built using shipping containers and is to be dismantled). It is not a surprise that it will look similar to the global event given that Qatar stepped in late to take over hosting duties after China, still in the grip of lockdown, relinquished it in 2022. It means that the West Asian nations will have the lion's share of fans.

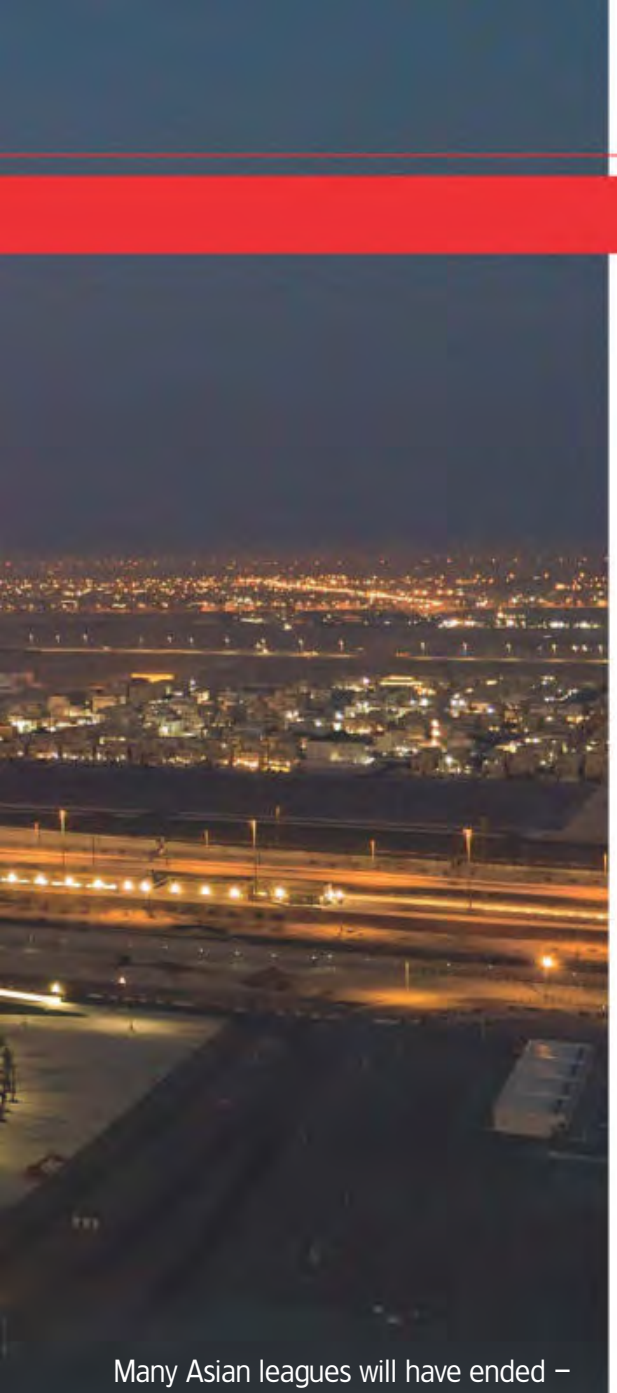
While the eastern half of the continent has had the upper hand in the Asian Champions League, that is not the case in the quadrennial Asian Cup. Take Japan's four wins out of the equation then South Korea in 1960 is the last triumph. Israel won in 1964 (16 years before leaving the confederation for UEFA) in a victory that is rarely mentioned in Asia. Next came Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to dominate until Japan's first win in 1992. Since then, Iraq – famously, in 2007 – Australia and then Qatar in 2019 have all tasted continental glory.

It also remains to be seen in what state the stars will be in when they arrive.

The tournament favourites...Japan

STADIUMS

Lusail Stadium
Lusail (88,966)
Al Bayt Stadium
Al Khor (68,895)
Khalifa International Stadium
Al Rayyan (45,857)
Ahmad bin Ali Stadium
Al Rayyan (45,032)
Education City Stadium
Al Rayyan (44,667)
Al Thumama Stadium
Doha (44,400)
Al Janoub Stadium
Al Wakrah (44,325)
Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Al Rayyan (15,000)
Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium
Doha (10,000)



Many Asian leagues will have ended – those in the east finished their seasons in November or December – or have a break. Japan, Iran, Australia and South Korea are full of players in action in Europe with the likes of Son Heung-min, Mehdi Taremi and Kaoru Mitoma playing week in and week out. With the World Cup as well, such stars have had little time to rest for over 18 months but the tournament needs these names to interest the more casual fans and viewers.

A few surprises and stories are also required. There are four Southeast Asian qualifiers for the first time ever and if one or two of Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand or Malaysia can go far, then excitement would be felt around the continent. The same holds true for South Asia's sole representatives India. In the central region, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have shown promise but need to deliver, and Chinese supporters would celebrate getting past the quarter-finals for the first time since 2004 on home soil. Palestine and Syria would love to provide some positive distraction from the news back home.

The usual suspects need to be challenged. Everything off the pitch is likely to go smoothly given that everything is already in place, but something unexpected on it would be welcome.

SCHEDULE

GROUP A

Jan 12	**Qatar v Lebanon**	Lusail Stadium
Jan 13	**China v Tajikistan**	Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium
Jan 17	**Lebanon v China**	Al Thumama Stadium
Jan 17	**Tajikistan v Qatar**	Al Bayt Stadium
Jan 22	**Qatar v China**	Khalifa International Stadium
Jan 22	**Tajikistan v Lebanon**	Jassim bin Hamad Stadium

GROUP B

Jan 13	**Australia v India**	Ahmad bin Ali Stadium
Jan 13	**Uzbekistan v Syria**	Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Jan 18	**Syria v Australia**	Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Jan 18	**India v Uzbekistan**	Ahmad bin Ali Stadium
Jan 23	**Australia v Uzbekistan**	Al Janoub Stadium
Jan 23	**Syria v India**	Al Bayt Stadium

GROUP C

Jan 14	**United Arab Emirates v Hong Kong**	Khalifa International Stadium
Jan 14	**Iran v Palestine**	Education City Stadium
Jan 18	**Palestine v United Arab Emirates**	Al Janoub Stadium
Jan 19	**Hong Kong v Iran**	Khalifa International Stadium
Jan 23	**Iran v United Arab Emirates**	Education City Stadium
Jan 23	**Hong Kong v Palestine**	Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium

GROUP D

Jan 14	**Japan v Vietnam**	Al Thumama Stadium
Jan 15	**Indonesia v Iraq**	Ahmad bin Ali Stadium
Jan 19	**Iraq v Japan**	Education City Stadium
Jan 19	**Vietnam v Indonesia**	Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium
Jan 24	**Japan v Indonesia**	Al Thumama Stadium
Jan 24	**Iraq v Vietnam**	Jassim bin Hamad Stadium

GROUP E

Jan 15	**South Korea v Bahrain**	Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Jan 15	**Malaysia v Jordan**	Al Janoub Stadium
Jan 20	**Jordan v South Korea**	Al Thumama Stadium
Jan 20	**Bahrain v Malaysia**	Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Jan 25	**South Korea v Malaysia**	Al Janoub Stadium
Jan 25	**Jordan v Bahrain**	Khalifa International Stadium

GROUP F

Jan 16	**Thailand v Kyrgyzstan**	Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium
Jan 16	**Saudi Arabia v Oman**	Khalifa International Stadium
Jan 21	**Oman v Thailand**	Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium
Jan 21	**Kyrgyzstan v Saudi Arabia**	Ahmad bin Ali Stadium
Jan 25	**Saudi Arabia v Thailand**	Education City Stadium
Jan 25	**Kyrgyzstan v Oman**	Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium

ROUND OF 16

(1)	Jan 28	**Winner B v 3rd A/C/D**	Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
(2)	Jan 28	**Runner-up A v Runner-up C**	Ahmad bin Ali Stadium
(3)	Jan 29	**Winner D v 3rd B/E/F**	Khalifa International Stadium
(4)	Jan 29	**Winner A v 3rd C/D/E**	Al Bayt Stadium
(5)	Jan 30	**Runner-up B v Runner-up F**	Al Janoub Stadium
(6)	Jan 30	**Winner F v Runner-up E**	Education City Stadium
(7)	Jan 31	**Winner E v Runner-up D**	Al Thumama Stadium
(8)	Jan 31	**Winner C v 3rd A/B/F**	Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium

QUARTER-FINALS

(9)	Feb 2	**Winner match 2 v Winner match 3**	Ahmad bin Ali Stadium
(10)	Feb 2	**Winner match 1 v Winner match 6**	Al Janoub Stadium
(11)	Feb 3	**Winner match 8 v Winner match 7**	Education City Stadium
(12)	Feb 3	**Winner match 4 v Winner match 5**	Al Bayt Stadium

SEMI-FINALS

(13)	Feb 6	**Winner match 9 v Winner match 10**	Ahmad bin Ali Stadium
(14)	Feb 7	**Winner match 11 v Winner match 12**	Al Thumama Stadium

FINAL

(15)	Feb 10	Lusail Stadium

Facetoface

IGOR STIMAC

"If you give me enough time to work with these boys we can achieve things"

India's head coach discusses his team's chances at the upcoming 2023 Asian Cup, and growing a football culture in the south Asian nation

You've been with India since 2019. How has the journey been so far?
It has been a great journey. In the last four years, we totally reconstructed the team. It's a whole new team. We kept a few experienced, older players as the spine of the team [but] we are one of the youngest teams in Asia with youth and energy, and we are proud of it. We are playing quite convincingly against lower-ranked teams – attractive football, I would say. As I said to our people in India, if you give me enough time to work with these boys we can achieve things.

You have a young team but it's heavily dependent on veteran and record scorer Sunil Chhetri. Is that a problem?
We are not heavily dependent on anyone. He is a very important part of our team, he is our leader and our goalscorer, but we have proven as a team that when he is not there we can replace him. Even without Sunil, we were scoring goals. We have a bigger pool of footballers for the national team. That's our advantage now. Whoever is not there with us we have a good replacement for him.

What then are some of the strengths of the Indian game?
The strengths of our game are obviously our youngsters. If you ask why, it's simple to answer. The boys who participated in the Under-17 World Cup went through a developmental programme, which helped them to develop better technical skills. They matured with the exposure they got through the World Cup experience and obviously most of the clubs provided them chances to prove themselves among the senior players. As a coach, I help at the international level, allowing them to feature for the senior national team at a very early age, which helps them to mature quicker. We have a very positive energy in every sense. These boys are different because they are fearless on the pitch. Now, we are ready to take risks to achieve things.

India hosted the Under-17 World Cup back in 2017. Does this help Indian football in the long term?
It absolutely helps, but that's just one small piece of the puzzle. It helps when we speak about infrastructure, which was redeveloped for the World Cup, as it should be. It helped these boys to have amazing exposure and be capable of spending a year-and-a-half together in developmental programmes, which helped them to start behaving as a unit, as a team, to start knowing each other better, which obviously helps the coaches.

How can football still grow in India?
We need to rebuild the football culture – it stayed alive only in certain states where football is still the number one sport. So, rebuilding the football culture is the most necessary thing to start realistically dreaming about the World Cup and new generations coming and becoming good professional football players.

What are your thoughts on India's Asian Cup group with Australia, Syria and Uzbekistan?
It's a tough draw for us, but it could have been worse also. I'm looking on the bright side. We knew before the draw that it was going to be tough for us because we were in pot four. It's going to be a competitive challenge because all these sides are very competitive with great coaches – Graham Arnold, Hector Cuper and Srecko Katanec.

In your opinion, who are the favourites to win the tournament?
Any team from pot one. Keep in mind that Qatar are the hosts, but with Saudi Arabia so close by they will have fantastic support during the tournament. They are a very strong team.

Some of the teams will have more time for preparation, which obviously helps. Some of these big Asian teams have most of their players playing in European leagues, so they will join the teams just three or four days prior to the tournament, which won't make it easier.

What will success be for India at the Asian Cup?
A better result than in the past. So far, we have been good. I think we had the best World Cup qualifying campaign in the history of the country, finishing third behind Qatar and Oman [in the 2022 edition]. We had a successful third round of qualifiers for the Asian Cup with a 100 per cent win rate [and] conceded only seven goals in the World Cup qualifiers. We are becoming more of a solid defensive unit.

We have come to a point where we have players for both kinds of games needed in football today. When we play against lower-ranked teams, we have a number of players who can play nice football in the final third with good build-up play and good possession. On the flip side, when we play against better teams, we have a very strong, solid defence with good counter-attacking options.

Does that describe the philosophy you are applying as India coach in general?
No, it depends on the stage of the qualifiers and who you're going to play with. Obviously, in the last couple of years, we have been playing only lower-ranked sides and we insisted on ball possession, more creativity, and more action in the final third. When we play in the Asian Cup, the opposition will be much better. We are going to need to think about how to stay deeper, how to organise ourselves in this middle press, and how to play more counter-attacking football.

Finally, what can India learn from Croatia, your native country?
Croatia can't serve as an example for India for various reasons – the size of the country, the states and the cultural differences. It's not easy to organise competitions in India, with such space and such a population. I often get asked why Croatia is so successful; Croatia is still very successful because it is keeping street football alive.

All Western, advanced or rich countries have the best facilities. They invest billions in infrastructure; everything is perfect for the players. It's different for Croatian players. They play on simple fields, without goals, in difficult circumstances. That's where they learn to control the ball – using a bad ball and stones as a goal. All these things are still helping Croatian players in their development. In some age groups, Croatians might not be the quickest or strongest, but technically they are far better than others.

India can learn from that. You don't need a lot of investment to rebuild a football culture. A good result from the national team would help a lot. Those players in rural areas need idols. We don't need Ronaldo or Messi, but Indian players to have followers.

Interview by Samindra Kunti

GROUP A

QATAR (1 ASIAN CUP WIN, 2019)

Their sole Asian Cup win was an unexpected success and suggested that Qatar had arrived at Asia's top table. Then came the ordeal of the 2022 World Cup: three defeats out of three with the entire planet watching.

Within weeks, Felix Sanchez, the coach who delivered both triumph and disaster, was out and replaced by Carlos Queiroz.

One of the most experienced coaches in world football, Queiroz himself was then suddenly fired in early December despite a good start to World Cup qualification, winning handsomely against Afghanistan and India.

Just like before the World Cup, preparations have been extensive with the CONCACAF Gold Cup, Gulf Cup and various friendlies.

A lot of the stars from 2019 are still around and it remains to be seen if home advantage helps or, as in 2022, hinders.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Almoez Ali
The goals seemed to have dried up for the 2019 top scorer, before he recently hit four in a World Cup qualifier against Afghanistan.

▼ THE COACH

Marquez Lopez
"Tintin" has had a month to get to grips but the ex-Espanyol coach has experience in Qatar and marks a return to Spanish coaches.

CHINA (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

It feels like a long time since 2004, when China reached the final of the Asian Cup. That was followed by two group-stage exits and then two quarter-final appearances, achievements that are still the parameters that define failure and success. Anything beyond the last eight is a big bonus.

It's never easy to predict what China will do, but it's safe to say that COVID and the lockdowns hit the football scene hard. A rebuild, of sorts, has been ongoing with Aleksandar Jankovic in charge, though it has been quite low key with a number of the old guard – Wu Lei, Zhang Linpeng and Wu Xi – still in place.

Results have been mixed with wins against Myanmar, Vietnam and Palestine and defeats against Uzbekistan and Syria. All were at home which may not be ideal preparation for the finals.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Zhang Yuning
The powerful Beijing Guoan target man missed much of the season through injury, but he's back and his presence is needed.

▼ THE COACH

Aleksandar Jankovic
The 51-year-old Serbian coach has come up through the Chinese youth teams, almost unnoticed, but now there is pressure to win.

TAJIKISTAN (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

The Central Asians have slowly been climbing up the FIFA rankings and a good showing in Qatar could see them enter the top 100 for the first time ever, but they will be more delighted at qualifying for the Asian Cup for the first time.

The national team has been developed partly through the use of a large contingent of players from Istiklol, the country's dominant club and well-respected throughout Asia, although there are suggestions that there is too much reliance on the old guard and the Istiklol connection, and that Croatian head coach Petar Segrt needs some freshness within the squad.

The Crowns have shown that they can win in Central and Southeast Asia but results against the Western Asian nations have not been quite as impressive, though that could simply be down to a lack of experience.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Alisher Dzhalilov
Can play out wide or more central and represented Russia at various youth levels before plumping for Tajikistan.

▼ THE COACH

Petar Segrt
The 57-year-old Croatian has moved from Afghanistan to the Maldives to Tajikistan and this could be his biggest challenge.

LEBANON (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

In a country that has suffered economically, politically and in many other ways over the years, the fact that the national team is still a force to be reckoned with is testament to the players and coaches.

Lebanon reached the final round of World Cup qualification in 2022 – for the second time out of three campaigns after doing the same in 2014 – with a pragmatic and physical style that frustrated more skilful opponents. Most players are in action in the local league, which is not in the best condition at the moment.

Now former West Ham United assistant coach Nikola Jurcevic is in place and trying to get the team, whose inability to score goals has cost them in the past, to play more on the front foot when possible. Against stronger opposition, however, they are happy to grind out results.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Mohamad Haidar
The veteran Ahed midfielder makes the team tick in an attacking sense, while also providing plenty of leadership.

▼ THE COACH

Nikola Jurcevic
The Croatian has worked in Austria, England, Russia, Turkey and Azerbaijan, but succeeding in Lebanon would be his finest achievement.

GROUP B

AUSTRALIA (1 ASIAN CUP WIN, 2015)

The 2015 Asian Cup champions can never be counted out. The Socceroos don't have the huge stars of the past, but were still able to get to the knockout stages at the 2022 World Cup and give eventual winners Argentina a tough game. In 2023, they played top-class opponents in England, Argentina and Mexico and should be nicely warmed-up, especially as coach Graham Arnold has been there for years.

The strong team-ethic usually serves the Socceroos well and they have a habit of getting results even when not playing well. Sometimes seem better suited to playing the underdog role, but that is rarely the case in Asia.

Even so, a team full of international experience that has plenty of goal threat throughout will be one of the favourites.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Harry Souttar
The big Leicester City centre-back has a strike-rate that most strikers would be proud of – effective at set-pieces at both ends.

▼ THE COACH

Graham Arnold
The 60-year-old is approaching 50 games in charge of the Socceroos and is a wily campaigner who is desperate for a trophy.

UZBEKISTAN (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

Asia's chokers – that is how the White Wolves are regarded in some quarters on the continent, though this is usually due to somehow failing to qualify for the World Cup when a place looked there for the taking. Have made the knockout stages of the last five Asian Cups but advanced beyond the quarter-finals just once, losing in the semis in 2011 – the last time the finals were hosted in Qatar.

Coach Srecko Katanec has given a talented team a harder edge while widening attacking options. A 3-3 draw in Mexico in September was followed by victories away from home against Vietnam, China and Turkmenistan.

They have the talent to go very far but it remains to be seen if this team, increasingly made up of players overseas – in Italy, Turkey, Russia, Greece and France – have the mentality to do it.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Otabek Shukurov
The midfielder links up play, has impressed in Turkey with Fatih Karagumruk and is increasingly showing his club form for his country.

▼ THE COACH

Srecko Katanec
Took Slovenia to the 2002 World Cup, has quality experience in Asia with the United Arab Emirates and Iraq, and looks to be the right man.

SYRIA (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

Syria have a poor record at the Asian Cup, with just two appearances this century and only one win in that time, in contrast to their showings in the last two World Cup qualification campaigns when they were in the race until almost the end.

Coach Hector Cuper emphasises defence, making his teams hard to beat but not always easy on the eye. It was an approach that did not work so well when he was in charge of Uzbekistan, but could be perfect for a team that loves to frustrate and beat the bigger boys.

Syria are happy to sit deep and slow the game down, but also have talented forwards like Omar Al Somah and Omar Khribin who can score goals out of nothing. It's a tough group but nobody will relish taking on the Qasioun Eagles.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Omar Al Somah
One of Asia's best strikers is also one of the most underrated. For a team that doesn't score many goals, he is crucial.

▼ THE COACH

Hector Cuper
It was a real coup for Syria to get the former Internazionale and Parma boss. His strict style could take the team to the next level.

INDIA (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

In 2011 India returned to the Asian Cup for the first time since 1984. In 2019 they won a game, and this time the aim is to reach the knockout stages, a realistic target given that 16 out of 24 teams will do so.

Coach Igor Stimac arrived in 2019 and led the team to a second successive South Asian Championship title in the summer.

The Blue Tigers are more experienced internationally these days and have become adept at clinically defeating weaker teams thanks to an organised defence, a solid goalkeeper in Gurpreet Singh and reliable striker in Sunil Chhetri – the third-highest active international goalscorer.

They still struggle, however, to defeat mid-ranking Asian powers, though beating Kuwait 1-0 away in a recent 2026 World Cup qualifier shows that they may now be overcoming that hurdle.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Lallianzuala Chhangte
The forward, 2023 Indian Player of the Year, has found his form of late both for club Mumbai City and country.

▼ THE COACH

Igor Stimac
The Croatian's stock has gone up and down, but has been in the post nearly five years. An ex-West Ham United and Derby County defender.

GROUP C

IRAN (3 ASIAN CUP WINS, LAST IN 1976)

Like Saudi Arabia and South Korea, Iran are a powerhouse with an Asian Cup drought – in their case going back to 1976 (after previous wins in 1968 and 1972). After the 2022 World Cup ended with Team Melli just missing out on the second round, they then won nine out of the next ten, including a win in Bulgaria and a 4-0 thrashing of Qatar.

The replacement of Carlos Queiroz with Amir Ghalenoei for a second spell was seen by fans as underwhelming, but he knows Iranian football better than most and has plenty of talent at his disposal. So far, he has not made too many changes.

Understandably so, as not many teams in Asia – or even the world – have better strikers than Sardar Azmoun of Roma and Porto's Mehdi Taremi, and the rest of the squad has talent and plenty of international experience.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Saeid Ezatolahi
The likes of Taremi and Azmoun get the headlines, but the Denmark-based defensive midfielder rarely puts a foot wrong.

▼ THE COACH

Amir Ghalenoei
Has coached several clubs in Iran, but lacks international experience. Has to show that he can lead talented players to the next level.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

The UAE have reached the last four of the Asian Cup on the past two occasions and would be delighted with something similar this time around. There is always plenty of talent in the team, bolstered by the occasional naturalised player such as the Brazilian-born Caio Canedo, and goals with Ali Mabkhout still adding to his tally of over 80 international goals.

Results and displays have been positive so far under Paulo Bento, who has been in place since July – fresh after taking South Korea to the last 16 of the World Cup.

The question for the Whites is often the same – can they get results against the real powerhouses of Asian football when the stakes are high? Easier on the eye than some of their West Asian neighbours, they don't always have the requisite stubbornness and steel.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Harib Abdalla
A speedy winger who loves to run at defences, the 20-year-old has a bright future and a big opportunity in January.

▼ THE COACH

Paulo Bento
Has led the national teams of Portugal and South Korea, where some felt he was stubborn tactically though players liked him.

HONG KONG (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

No coach will admit to just being happy to be in Qatar, but Hong Kong (the first-ever Asian Cup hosts back in 1956) are as they prepare for a first Asian Cup since 1968. Over the years, the team have developed into one that may not be especially entertaining but is increasingly hard to beat.

Coach Jorn Andersen has been in place since 2021 and under the Norwegian the team are well organised, but anything other than fourth place in a tough group will be a huge success. Qualification came by virtue of finishing above Afghanistan and Cambodia – a fairly low bar – and it will be a tough reintroduction to the Asian Cup after a gap of over 55 years.

They will look to frustrate United Arab Emirates in the opening game before taking on the mighty Iran.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Matt Orr
The forward has scored goals for fun in China's second tier in the 2023 season and, with service, can make a difference.

▼ THE COACH

Jorn Andersen
Has quite a CV with spells in North Korea and Mainz in Germany. Taking Hong Kong into the last 16 would be his greatest achievement.

PALESTINE (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

It goes without saying that Palestine will attract more attention for what has been happening in Gaza than anything that the national team does on the pitch. Yet the team have established themselves in the past decade as a mid-ranking Asian power and have appeared at the last two Asian Cups. This time, the target is a place in the knockout stages for the first time.

The team has been heading in the right direction under coach Makram Daboub. His task, never easy in Palestine where players can struggle just to get out to play international games, has obviously become even harder and it remains to be seen how the situation at home affects the team mentally. The fact that a number of the squad are based overseas in Europe, South America and elsewhere in Asia, may help.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Oday Dabbagh
The forward plays his club football in Belgium and the 25-year-old has scored goals wherever he has played.

▼ THE COACH

Makram Daboub
The Tunisian tactician has performed well since taking over in 2021, producing some encouraging results in difficult circumstances.

GROUP D

JAPAN (4 ASIAN CUP WINS, LAST IN 2011)

The tournament's most successful team – with victories in 1992, 2000, 2004 and 2011 – are also Asia's best team at the moment and strong favourites. They impressed by reaching the last 16 at the 2022 World Cup and have continued to do so with that 4-1 victory in Germany a standout. They have great strength in depth and could bring an entire squad full of players active in the best European leagues.

Expectations to win may be the only potential weakness now that the team seems to have solved its problem of turning pressure and possession into goals, with those goals being spread around nicely.

The challenges for Japan are to take the next step and become consistently one of the world's best and, while it remains to be seen if the current coach is the right man for that, he can certainly win the Asian Cup.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Takefusa Kubo
The exciting creator has been a standout in Spain this season and it could be time to stamp his authority at a major tournament.

▼ THE COACH

Hajime Moriyasu
After a period of great results, the Asian Coach of the Year is sounding a confident note and has won over most doubters.

INDONESIA (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

Appearing at the Asian Cup for the first time since 2007 (when they were co-hosts) thanks to an impressive 2-1 win in Kuwait. Since losing to Vietnam in the semi-finals of Southeast Asia's tournament in January, Indonesia went on a good run of results, losing just one of the next seven – against world champions Argentina – although they were brought back down to earth with a 5-1 defeat to Iraq in the 2026 World Cup qualifiers in November.

For a team that has often underachieved, confidence remains high with coach Shin Tae-yong, young players such as Egy Maulana, Ramadhan Sananta and Marselino Ferdinan, and more players than ever playing elsewhere in Asia and in Europe. If the *Merah Putih* can be more clinical in attack, then they have a chance to get out of the group stage for the first time.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Elkan Baggott
The Ipswich Town defender has settled into the team nicely, is a commanding presence at the back and becoming a leader.

▼ THE COACH

Shin Tae-yong
The South Korean, who led his homeland to victory over Germany at the 2018 World Cup, has worked hard to develop a young team.

IRAQ (1 ASIAN CUP WIN, 2007)

Nobody will forget the 2007 Asian Cup when Iraq shocked the world by winning the trophy, and since then they have completed the knockout set, reaching the last 16, quarters and semi-finals.

Playing close to their own backyard, they have the chance to go far once again. There is always plenty of talent in the team and the fact that half, or even more, of the squad play their football elsewhere, in Europe and Asia, adds a new level of experience and consistency.

After a period of seven months without a coach, Jesus Casas, a former Spain assistant, took over in 2022 and has been building a more possession-based style.

Preparations have been more extensive than usual with narrow defeats against Colombia and Russia, while a 100 per cent start to 2026 World Cup qualifying should breed confidence.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Ali Jasim
The 19-year-old playmaker made his debut in October and looked at home straightaway. Skilful, creative and exciting to watch.

▼ THE COACH

Jesus Casas
Usually a number two, and always in Spain – apart from a spell with Javi Garcia at Watford, Casas can make his name with the Lions of Mesopotamia.

VIETNAM (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

At something of a crossroads after over five years under coach Park Hang-seo. The South Korean's pragmatism and work ethic took the team to new heights, including the quarter-finals of the 2019 tournament and a narrow loss to Japan – opening game opponents this time around.

After Park's counter-attacking style, Philippe Troussier is trying to instil a more possession-based approach and results have been mixed. Home wins over fellow mid-ranking teams such as Hong Kong, Palestine and Syria were solid enough, but were followed by defeats to China and Uzbekistan and then a 6-0 thrashing against South Korea, a disappointing performance that shows there is still some way to go. No goals were scored in those three losses and that is the obvious challenge for the Golden Stars.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Nguyen Tien Linh
The 26-year-old has become a reliable goalscorer against neighbours. If he can score against the top teams, Vietnam can shine.

▼ THE COACH

Philippe Troussier
The "White Witch Doctor" has worked behind the scenes in Vietnam and has made changes to the style and personnel.

GROUP E

SOUTH KOREA (2 ASIAN CUP WINS, LAST IN 1960)

Asia's most successful World Cup team have not won the Asian Cup since back-to-back victories in 1956 and 1960. It wasn't always a priority but it is now and coach Jurgen Klinsmann has asked to be judged on this tournament.

The German arrived last February and was under fire after five winless games, but five successive victories – including 2026 World Cup qualifying wins versus Singapore (5-0) and China (3-0) – have eased the pressure.

Supporters have been upset by Klinsmann seeming to spend more time in California than Seoul but he is lucky to have talent at his disposal: Premier League forwards Son Heung-min and Hwang Hee-chan, PSG's Lee Kang-in pulling the creative strings, and Kim Min-jae of Bayern Munich at centre-back. It is an impressive spine that should be enough to take the Taegeuk Warriors far.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Lee Kang-in
The PSG midfielder can be a delight to watch and has scored all of his Korea goals under Klinsmann, but has yet to take Asia by storm.

▼ THE COACH

Jurgen Klinsmann
Full of smiles and positivity, but the ex-USA and Germany boss needs to convince fans that he has the nous to lead them to the title.

MALAYSIA (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

The 2007 co-hosts have qualified for the first time since 1980 – a reflection of how far the team has come under South Korean coach Kim Pan-gon.

In September, the Tigers came back from 2-0 down to draw 2-2 with Syria and then drew 1-1 away to China – opponents that have both been at a level above in Asia. That was followed by wins over Kyrgyzstan and Chinese Taipei in a flying start to 2026 World Cup qualifying.

They have been helped by a number of naturalised players, helping to improve the mentality as much as the team's quality.

Since the golden period ended in the 1980s, Malaysia have never really felt that they can take on the big boys, but confidence is increasing and Kim has also instilled a real team ethic. Scoring goals against Bahrain and Jordan is going to be key in Qatar.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Dion Cools
The defender, with Belgian-Malaysian parentage, has UEFA Champions League experience and scores regularly for a centre-back.

▼ THE COACH

Kim Pan-gon
The South Korean is underrated, but has plenty of experience in Asia – mainly in Hong Kong – and knows how to organise and prepare.

JORDAN (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

Something of an enigma, Jordan can be tricky customers – especially on home soil when they have caused problems for Asia's elite – but can then disappoint when expectations start to rise.

They have a decent record at recent finals, with appearances in the last eight in 2004 and 2011 and a place in the round of 16 in 2019.

Usually very disciplined and hard to break down, the federation was delighted to hire Hussein Ammouta in the summer, a Moroccan coach who has had considerable success in Qatar with Al Sadd and his homeland, leading Wydad to the African Champions League title in 2017. He could be the perfect man for the job.

Preparations haven't been great; there was a 6-0 thrashing at the hands of Norway and a 1-1 draw with Tajikistan in a 2026 World Cup qualifier, but Jordan will fight for every point in Qatar.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Yazan Al Naimat
The striker has impressed since moving to the Qatari league in 2022 and has become a reliable goalscorer for the national team.

▼ THE COACH

Hussein Ammouta
A hugely successful coach in the region, the 54-year-old Moroccan's tournament knowhow and Jordan's team spirit could help them go far.

BAHRAIN (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

The tiny nation have often punched above their weight in Asia and reached the semi-finals in 2004 and the second round in 2019.

In July, they pulled off a coup by hiring former Spain striker Juan Antonio Pizzi as head coach. The man who took Chile to glory in the 2016 Copa America has his work cut out developing his attacking style of play in a Bahrain team that is accustomed to being more stubborn than silky against stronger opposition.

Results and performances so far have been solid and suggest that Pizzi is taking his time and not making sweeping changes.

It may well be that a defensive approach against South Korea in their opening game is followed by more aggression against Malaysia and Jordan in what is an interesting group from which all teams will feel they can progress.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Mohamed Marhoon
A goalscoring midfielder who also does his fair share of running, Marhoon has experience that seems beyond his 25 years.

▼ THE COACH

Juan Antonio Pizzi
His stock may have fallen a little since leading Chile to their continental triumph in 2016, but he has good experience in West Asia.

GROUP F

SAUDI ARABIA (3 ASIAN CUP WINS, LAST IN 1996)

In the seven editions between 1984 and 2007, the Green Falcons failed to reach the final just once and lifted the trophy three times – in 1984, 1988 and 1996.

Much has changed since that famous Argentina World Cup win with nine defeats, one draw and one win against Yemen in the following 11 games. Herve Renard left to be replaced by Roberto Mancini in August, not giving the Italian much time to solve the problems of a lack of goalscorers and goalkeepers who rarely play for their clubs.

But the talent is there in the shape of Asian Footballer of the Year Salem Al Dawsari, who has been increasingly impressive this season in the star-studded Saudi Pro League, and defenders such as Saud Abdulhamid, Hassan Al Tambakti and Sultan Al Ghannam who have thrived in dealing with world-class attackers.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Saleh Al Shehri
Hasn't been playing much for Al Hilal, but hit four goals in two World Cup qualifiers in November and is Mancini's go-to striker.

▼ THE COACH

Roberto Mancini
Knows how to win a continental crown, but this would be an even greater success than Euro 2020 given the lack of time spent for preparation.

THAILAND (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

For a long time, the War Elephants have been the number one team in Southeast Asia with only Vietnam as credible challengers. Thailand have the technical ability and increasing international experience.

Former Manchester City trialist Teerasil Dangda is still going strong at 35 and the striker is an Asian legend, as is winger Chanathip Songkrasin and full-back Theerathon Bunmathan.

The spine of the team is strong and they have become a force to be reckoned with in Asia, though have not quite figured out how to beat the continent's powerhouses. That final step is the hardest.

They actually reached the last 16 in 2019, and that is the minimum target this time, but preparations have been affected by the firing of Brazilian coach Mano Polking in November after defeat to China in 2026 World Cup qualifying.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Suphanat Mueanta
The fast winger has already won three Thai league titles at the age of 21, and has just moved to Belgium's OH Leuven on loan.

▼ THE COACH

Masatada Ishii
Appointed just weeks before kick-off with little time to prepare, the Japanese coach has led Thai titans Buriram United to two league titles.

KYRGYZSTAN (0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

Beat their regional rivals Tajikistan away from home to appear at the Asian Cup for the first time in 2019, where they reached the second round and were beaten 3-2 after extra-time by the United Arab Emirates.

Similar defensive frailties have been in evidence in the build-up to this tournament; they have been letting in too many goals, shipping five to Iran in the summer and four to Malaysia in November's World Cup qualifiers.

This is something of a transition period. Aleksandr Krestinin left as head coach in April after eight-and-a-half years, with the Russian appearing to have run out of ideas after the highs of 2019.

He was replaced by Stefan Tarkovic, but he has yet to really imprint his philosophy on the team, however that could change after Qatar – especially if naturalised players begin to make a difference.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Alimardon Shukurov
Midfielder who left Turkey for Belarus and has shined for Neman Grodno. Has been linked with a move to Spain.

▼ THE COACH

Stefan Tarkovic
The 50-year-old former coach of Slovakia will be looking to fill the big boots of Krestinin. The Asian Cup will be a good indication.

OMAN 0 ASIAN CUP WINS)

The Reds have improved under Branko Ivankovic to become a solid second-tier Asian power, just one level below the powerhouses, and they were only a point behind Australia in 2022 World Cup qualification. Maintaining that status is the challenge.

Well organised and able to counter-attack at speed, Oman are a tidy team that give very little away. They lack the star power – even in West Asian terms – that some of their neighbours have but almost have the feel of a club side.

The opening clash with Saudi Arabia should be one of the standout games of the first stage and will give an indication as to whether the second round is the limit of their ambitions – as in 2019 – or whether they can get to the last eight, which would be a success, or even further.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Harib Al Saadi
One of the more underrated players in Asia, the experienced and hard-working midfielder has been making Oman tick for years.

▼ THE COACH

Branko Ivankovic
The Croatian took a divided Iran team to the 2006 World Cup but seems happier in the more gentle surroundings of Oman.

Glenn Moore

Oscar-worthy drama in NWSL

The 2023 National Women's Soccer League season threw up plenty of dramatic storylines

The NWSL's 2023 championship match was held in San Diego, but perhaps it would have been more fitting to have it played up the California coast in Hollywood. There were plotlines galore as Gotham FC pulled off an underdog victory against OL Reign.

The match was dramatic enough, Gotham hanging on to a 2-1 win despite defender Nealy Martin going in goal for the closing minutes after goalkeeper Mandy Haught was dismissed.

The winners' story arc was just as compelling. Gotham were a league embarrassment three years ago and finished bottom as recently as last season. Though aided by a system that allows the sixth-placed team in a 12-team competition to win the title via post-season play-offs, they did it the hard way, winning away to the teams placed second and third alongside beating fourth-placed Reign – who had put out regular season winners San Diego Wave.

But for all the stories swirling around it, the seasonal climax was overshadowed by another blockbuster – the appointment of Emma Hayes as US coach. This was flagged the week before when it was announced she was leaving Chelsea for a job outside the Women's Super League, and confirmed a few days after Gotham's victory.

US Soccer's decision to look across the Atlantic was illuminating. The 2023 World Cup confirmed that the European game now has the tactical superiority to overcome the depth and athleticism of America's player pool.

It was not just the historically early last-16 exit of the US. England's WSL had 94 players at the World Cup, 40 of whom made the semi-finals. Spain's Liga F had 72 players, including 21 of the winning squad, the NWSL 61, only three of whom reached the semis.

Hayes is well suited to blending the cultures. Earlier in her career, she spent eight years coaching in the US at every level from Under-8s to Chicago Red Stars (for whom she signed a young Rapinoe) in the NWSL's precursor league, Women's Professional Soccer. Hugely successful at Chelsea, she will be the highest-paid coach in women's football with an annual salary in excess of £1 million. She will take over at the end of the European season and lead the US at the Olympics.

> Rapinoe crumpled to the ground having suffered a torn Achilles…it was a sad ending to one of the most remarkable careers in the women's game

Much of the focus, though, was on individuals. Pre-game attention was on the "golden farewell", with either Reign's Megan Rapinoe or Gotham's Ali Krieger set to end a glittering career with their first NWSL championship while the other walked off stage bereft.

Three minutes into the match, that narrative took a cruel turn when Rapinoe crumpled to the ground having suffered a torn Achilles. Though the 38-year-old put a brave face on it, even showing up for post-game media in a medical boot, it was a sad ending to one of the most remarkable careers in the women's game.

By contrast there was a heart-warming tale in the Gotham ranks with Mana Shim and Sinead Farrelly, the two players whose brave testimony was at the heart of the NWSL's 2021 sexual abuse coaching scandal, both coming out of retirement to play a role in the team's success.

Heartbreaking end …OL Reign's Megan Rapinoe limps off in her final game

Yet, while significant, hiring Hayes is not revolutionary. Both coaches in the NWSL final were European. Reign's Laura Harvey used to work with Hayes at Arsenal, while Gotham's Juan Carlos Amoros had a decade at Tottenham Hotspur and a season at Real Betis.

Harvey has been one of the NWSL's outstanding coaches, but despite winning the regular season three times with Reign has never won the championship match. Most thought that wait would end this year after Reign knocked out Angel City and Wave – coached by another Englishwoman, Casey Stoney. But Gotham had mettle, as they had already proven with clean sheets in wins at North Carolina Courage and Portland Thorns, despite a risky high line.

Their unexpected triumph had echoes of the New Jersey franchise's previous title, back in 2009 in the first season of WPS. Then known as Sky Blue, they clawed their way into the play-offs by finishing fourth in an eight-team league having lost more than they won, before beating a star-studded Los Angeles Sol in the final.

WPS folded to be replaced in 2013 by the NWSL, with Sky Blue making the semi-finals in the first year; but after that, nothing. Average attendances never climbed to 4,000 and the club became a byword for mismanagement.

It was not just that they had not finished in the top four since 2013 – despite having players like Sam Kerr, Carli Lloyd and Kelley O'Hara – nor that they rattled through coaches and won only one game in 2018; players complained housing was sub-standard, with cardboard-covered broken windows and host families who viewed them as babysitters, while training facilities lacked toilets and showers and travel was bargain bucket. It got so bad,

NWSL champions... NJ/NY Gotham FC

drafted players, such as current US international Hailie Mace, went overseas rather than play for them.

In 2020 there was an overhaul, a ground-share deal made with New York Red Bulls, and new investors drawn in – including, in an odd quirk, Rapinoe's fiancée, basketball star Sue Bird. A re-branding to NJ/NY Gotham FC followed a year later.

The revival was not immediate, as 2022's last place highlights. But in the close-season Amoros was appointed coach, O'Hara returned, Lynn Williams and Spain's Esther Gonzalez were signed. They joined fellow US stalwarts Krieger, Kristie Mewis, Allie Long and Midge Purce.

It was Purce who created both goals in the final, setting up Williams for the opener before sending in a corner for Esther to head home the second. Rose Lavelle scored once in between but, despite good chances and Haught's red card, Reign failed to find another.

There were 25,011 at Snapdragon Stadium and a TV audience in excess of 800,000 (slightly down on last year, but group-watching and streaming may have deflated the figure). Across the season, TV figures were 21 per cent up, helping the NWSL ink a new deal bringing in $240m over four years, a new record for a women's domestic league and an astonishing 50-fold increase on the previous $4.5m three-year deal.

Like all the best dramas, there will also be new and returning characters. Utah Royals, who disappeared in 2020 after an ownership scandal, will return under the aegis of MLS club Real Salt Lake. Bay FC, an independent San Francisco Bay Area club, arrive, initially based in San Jose. The script is yet to be written, but the fact that there is an audience is beyond doubt.

Round-up

African champions... Mamelodi Sundowns

SUNDOWNS CROWNED AFRICAN QUEENS ONCE AGAIN

Mamelodi Sundowns regained the Women's African Champions League title with a comprehensive success at the fortnight-long finals in Ivory Coast. The South Africans beat SC Casablanca 3-0 in the final, completing a tournament in which they won all five matches without conceding a goal. Refilwe Tholakele, who scored twice in the final, was the leading goalscorer with five while Boitumelo Rabale, who scored the other goal, was named best player.

Casablanca had emerged from the scramble behind Sundowns in Group A ahead of Tanzania's JKT Queens. The host nation's Athletico FC d'Abidjan picked up a point, against Casablanca in the tournament's opening game.

Group B was tighter, with all four teams able to qualify going into the final round. Defending champions AS FAR beat Mali's AS Mande to do so, while Ghana's Ampen Darkoa, beaten 3-0 by Mande three days earlier, defeated Huracanes of Equatorial Guinea to top the group. They lost, however, to Casablanca on penalties in the semi-finals after a 2-2 draw.

The eight teams had qualified via regional qualifiers.

Homecoming... French legend Amandine Henry

DIAMONDS AND ANGELS PROGRESS IN ASIA

Urawa Red Diamonds and Hyundai Steel Red Angels, the reigning Japanese and South Korean champions, qualified for the final of the invitational AFC Women's Club Championship,

Asian finalists...Japan's Urawa Red Diamonds

winning groups hosted in Thailand and Uzbekistan respectively. Diamonds will host the final in Saitama at a date to be confirmed.

The eight-team event is the fourth and final pilot for an Asian Women's Champions League, due to be launched for the 2024-25 season.

HENRY RETURNS TO HOMETOWN CLUB

Amandine Henry joined newly promoted Lille on loan from Los Angeles-based Angel City.

A seven-time Champions League winner with Lyon, and NWSL champion with Portland Thorns, the midfielder was born and bred in the northern French city.

FIFA TO FINALLY HOLD WOMEN'S FUTSAL FINALS

The world governing body is to stage a 16-nation Futsal Women's World Cup in 2025. The idea was originally proposed in 2018 but lack of progress prompted a campaign for gender equality by the International Women's Futsal Players Association. The first men's Futsal World Cup was in 1989.

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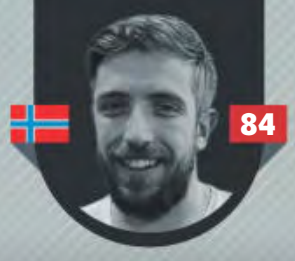

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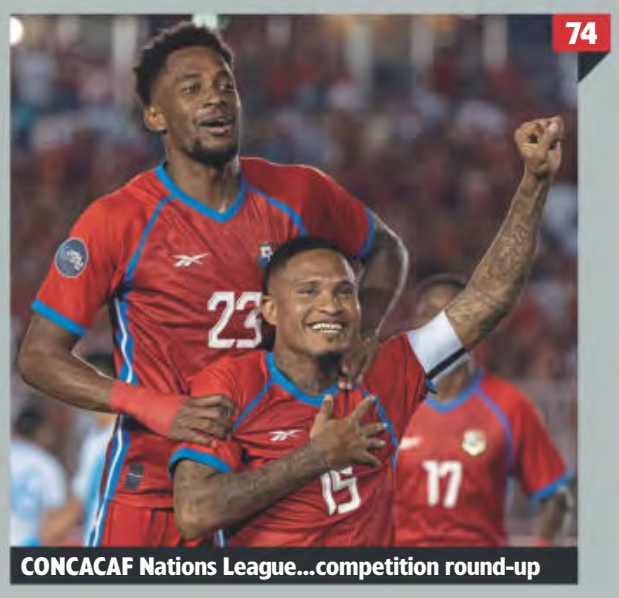

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CONCACAF Nations League...competition round-up

Europe

NICK BIDWELL

Usual suspects advance to Euro 2024 finals

Europe's big-hitters all secure their tickets to Germany

The fact that Portugal won all ten of their Euro 2024 qualifiers, the only country to do so, would not have come as a surprise to anyone aware of the international track record of their head coach Roberto Martinez who, in 37 ties at the helm of Belgium and Portugal, has not lost a single one (34 wins and 3 draws).

Portugal certainly set the bar high in 2023. Not only was this their first-ever 100 per cent qualifying campaign, it also featured the biggest win in their history (a 9-0 romp against Luxembourg in September) and was their quickest qualification for a tournament, secured after just seven matchdays. With 36 goals to their credit, Martinez's side are now the most prolific Portuguese outfit en route to a European Championship or World Cup and, after conceding just two goals, they are one of only four nations – alongside France (1996), Italy (2012) and Romania (2016) – to have let in so few in pre-Euro action.

France, as disciplined and efficient under coach Didier Deschamps as ever, very nearly were as flawless, winning their first seven games in Group B before being held to a 2-2 draw in Greece in the final round of fixtures. The highlight of the French campaign was the 14-0 hammering of ten-man Gibraltar in Nice in November, the widest victory in the history of *Les Bleus*. That the French were seven-up within 37 minutes says it all.

Many French pundits were expecting something of an uncertain transition period when key veterans such as goalkeeper Hugo Lloris, striker Karim Benzema and centre-back Raphael Varane announced their international retirements early in 2023. But Deschamps' side simply have not missed a beat. Their depth of talent is frightening, exemplified by the emergence of 17-year-old Paris Saint-Germain midfield starlet Warren Zaire-Emery, who marked his debut against Gibraltar with a goal.

Record breakers...Group J winners Portugal secured their place at the finals in style

Not one of the European big boys fell victim to the sifting process. England, inspired by the likes of Declan Rice, Bukayo Saka, Jude Bellingham and Harry Kane, remained unbeaten in their pool, as did Belgium, for whom striker Romelu Lukaku amassed no fewer than 14 goals, making him the leading marksman in qualification ahead of Cristiano Ronaldo (ten), Kylian Mbappe (nine) and Kane (eight). Despite home and away defeats to France in Group B, the Netherlands were never in real danger of missing out. Croatia, on the podium at the last two World Cups, blew hot and cold in Group D yet still made it through as runners-up. Euro 2024 will be their seventh consecutive appearance at a top tournament.

Spain swiftly recovered from their shock 2-0 defeat to Scotland in March, going on to win all six of their remaining games and deservedly claim top spot in Group A. Such a strong set of results of late, including the conquest of the UEFA Nations League last summer, has clearly boosted the morale of *La Roja*. "We have a super team," says skipper Alvaro Morata. The one bum note? The recent ACL injury that will sideline Barcelona midfield starlet Gavi for several months.

> **Not only was this Portugal's first-ever 100 per cent qualifying campaign, it also featured the biggest win in their history**

Of all the continent's powerhouses, only reigning European champions Italy were truly at risk of not working their passage to Germany. Erratic defensively and destabilised by the resignation in August of coach Roberto Mancini

Review

Nervy finish...Italy players celebrate after a 0-0 draw with Ukraine takes them to the Euros

– who was replaced by ex-Napoli boss Luciano Spalletti – the *Azzurri* were on tenterhooks right until the bitter end, finally sealing the all-important runners-up spot in Group C thanks to a nervy goalless draw with Ukraine in Leverkusen in November. It was a close-run thing though; the Ukrainians had a stoppage-time penalty appeal turned down by VAR, and it was only a superior head-to-head record with the Ukrainians that took Italy through.

The most inspired appointment of the entire Euro 2024 qualification programme was probably made by the Turkish federation, who replaced the German Stefan Kuntz with former Italy striker Vincenzo Montella in September. Montella duly came up trumps in his first game in charge, overseeing a brilliant 1-0 victory in Croatia, a crucial step in the Turks' dominance of Group D.

Two Euro 2024 busts particularly stand out. Sweden, whose reputation for solidity and consistency seems to have totally deserted them, and Norway, who for all the majestic class of midfielder Martin Odegaard and goal machine Erling Haaland, were hugely disappointing in Group A. Both also missed out on the play-offs, which take place in March and will decide the remaining three finalists.

Standings and results on page 91.

Thrashing...Gibraltar players watch on as they concede one of 14 goals v France

South America

TIM VICKERY

Six down, 12 to go

Argentina, Uruguay and Colombia lead the way a third of the way through qualifying, while Brazil stumble on the long road to the 2026 World Cup

After three intense months of action, there is now a long pause for breath in South America's World Cup qualifiers. The opening six rounds – the first third of the campaign – were played between September and November. The second third is not until the same time in 2024. For a full ten months, then, the table will look good to some, and make uncomfortable viewing for others.

There have been three coaching changes in the bottom half, with more likely to come. Juan Reynoso grimly hangs on with Peru after six games brought two points and only one goal. His problem is the gradual replacement of a successful generation, a task that proved too much for Chile's Eduardo Berizzo, who stepped down after round five. Paraguay, with Julio Enciso injured and Miguel Almiron also missing games, are still well short of the quality that took them to the World Cup quarter-finals back in 2010, and have scored only one goal, forcing the replacement of Guillermo Barros Schelotto by Daniel Garnero. And Bolivia have been waiting some time for a generation as good as the class of 1994. After a disastrous start, Gustavo Costas gave way to Antonio Carlos Zago.

And completing the bottom half of the table are Brazil. They had never before lost consecutive games in qualification. Now they have lost three, including a first-ever home defeat – a 1-0 loss to

Strong start... Uruguay celebrate during their win in Argentina

Colombia's star man ...Luis Diaz scored twice in a 2-1 win against Brazil

Baptism of fire... Brazil's interim boss Fernando Diniz

Argentina in a game marred by clashes between fans and police which put back kick-off by nearly half an hour.

A promising and interesting coach, Fernando Diniz has looked out of his depth in his stand-in role. Without time on the training field, his side have looked chaotic and rudderless. Only the bottom two (Bolivia and Peru) have conceded more goals – and despite the innate hostility to the idea of a foreigner taking charge, many will be happy if Carlo Ancelotti does indeed step in later in 2024.

Above Brazil, there are three sides feeling moderately pleased with themselves. Ecuador have shrugged off their three-point penalty (for administrative irregularities), and while the squad does not count on great strength in depth, they have a good group of centre-backs and a 16-year-old sensation in Kendry Paez.

Venezuela might be a little concerned that key centre-forward Salomon Rondon looks past his best, but sound defence has hauled them up to fourth. Colombia are third – Nestor Lorenzo's side are the only unbeaten team left in the field – but a lack of goals, which cost them a place in Qatar, is still a problem.

And that leaves two teams with plenty of reasons to be cheerful. Probably the happiest are Uruguay, gelling very nicely under Marcelo Bielsa. Their key moment was towards the end of matchday three, away to Colombia. They were 2-1 down and facing a second straight defeat – having lost to Ecuador the month before – when they were awarded a penalty. Up stepped Darwin Nunez. He had yet to score – a bone of contention in a team where Luis Suarez (since recalled) and Edinson Cavani had both been discarded. Miss, and the pressure would be on. But Nunez scored, and Uruguay had a draw that they then followed up with wins over Brazil and Argentina. Nunez is now top of the qualifying scoring charts with five goals, and is the cutting edge of a dynamic young side who are looking very impressive – especially in a textbook performance to win 2-0 away to Argentina.

Brazil had never before lost consecutive games in qualification. Now they have lost three, including a first-ever home defeat

The world champions, though, remain two points clear at the top. The Uruguay loss is the only blotch on an otherwise perfect record, and they now have that historic win in Brazil to celebrate.

But there are some question marks. How long can Lionel Messi go on? Clearly less than fully fit, against Brazil he had one of the most ineffective performances of his career, and was substituted before the end. Centre-back Nicolas Otamendi got the only goal – as he did the previous month against Paraguay – but he cannot go on forever either, and there are not a lot of likely replacements around. And is coach Lionel Scaloni still committed to the cause? After the Brazil match he confessed that he was feeling drained, and was considering his future.

For Scaloni, Messi and Otamendi, the next round of World Cup qualifiers in September 2024 must surely seem a long time away. Before then there are FIFA dates in March – when the South Americans will at last look to test themselves in friendlies against major European nations – and then in June and July there is an expanded Copa America in the USA, a vital opportunity for coaches new and old to have some time with their players to prepare for the next steps on the road to 2026.

Future in doubt... Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni

Standings and results on page 90.

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Stumbles and strolls

Some of Africa's top contenders saw their 2026 World Cup qualification campaigns get off to a rocky start

Update

There is still a long road to North America 2026, but some African nations are already nervous about claiming one of the continent's nine automatic World Cup qualification spots.

Continental giants Nigeria and Ghana made a particularly poor start to what is a two-year process and will have some catching up to do when the qualifying schedule resumes in June.

Draws for Nigeria at home to the small mountain kingdom of Lesotho and then away against Zimbabwe in neutral Rwanda left the future of coach Jose Peseiro out on a limb just weeks before the kick-off of the Africa Cup of Nations finals, while there was histrionic social media fury directed at Ghana coach Chris Hughton after the Black Stars went down to the Comoros, reviving the embarrassment of their shock loss to the Indian Ocean islanders at the last Cup of Nations in Cameroon in one of

Under pressure... Chris Hughton's Ghana lost 1-0 to Comoros

Perfect start... Ivory Coast have a 100 per cent record after two games

the great shocks in tournament history.

Then it was 3-2, this time in Moroni it ended 1-0 with the winner from Myziane Maolida, a former teenage prodigy at Lyon and a French youth international who has switched allegiance and added to the playing pool of the small island nation that continues to punch way above its weight.

Lesotho's draw in Uyo was a massive result for a country who have never previously qualified for any major international tournament and were expected to be the whipping boys in Group C.

Nigerian officials admitted they wanted to sack Peseiro but did not have the money to pay out his contract. "We have to respect his contract. If we had the money to give to him, we were going to relieve him. We are not happy," said Nigerian Football Federation board member Nse Essien.

Nigeria had to come from behind to draw 1-1 against the Basotho and then do the same when they met Zimbabwe, who went ahead from a Walter Musona free-kick that was arguably the best of all the goals scored in the first two rounds of qualifying matches.

Zimbabwe were among 19 countries forced, because of poor stadium conditions or the security situation in their country, to play their home matches at a neutral venue. The Confederation of African Football's clampdown on bad pitches and grubby stadia was meant to shame errant countries to hastily fix up their facilities, but only a few have acted quickly. The threat of not having their national team be able to play at home was expected to prompt governments, or municipal authorities, into quick action but many seem less bothered by the sanction, which is not what CAF anticipated.

Other upsets saw Rwanda beat South Africa 2-0 on a waterlogged plastic pitch, where their kick and rush approach was much better suited to the conditions, while Sudan had a 1-0 victory over the Democratic Republic of Congo. There has been no football in Sudan while the civil war rages on, so for their team to be able to win the Group B clash in Benghazi was unexpected.

Draws for Nigeria at home to Lesotho and then away against Zimbabwe in neutral Rwanda left the future of coach Jose Peseiro out on a limb

Algeria, Egypt, Ivory Coast, Morocco and Tunisia were among the top seeds to get off to a 100 per cent start and already top the groups they were expected to dominate.

Algeria did not impress in their opening Group G game against Somalia in Algiers, where a runaway result was anticipated, despite going into the lead through a second-minute own goal. In the end, they were 3-1 winners but their next match away against Mozambique was a clinical 2-0 win. The 35-year-old striker Islam Slimani's goal against the Somalis was his 18th goal in World Cup qualifying games and equals the African record previously set by Cameroon's Samuel Eto'o and since matched by Ivory Coast's Didier Drogba and Moumouni Dagano of Burkina Faso.

Mohamed Salah was in spectacular form with four goals for Egypt as they thrashed tiny Djibouti 6-0 in front of a surprisingly small crowd in Cairo, but the Liverpool forward was set upon by overeager spectators in neutral Liberia when Egypt played their second Group A game against Sierra Leone. There was a fracas between Salah and the invading spectators, and he needed protection from security and his team-mates.

Morocco had a belated start when their first Group E opponents Eritrea withdrew. This was not a surprise; the hermit country has never been a reliable participant because when they do play, many of their players slip away to claim political asylum. Morocco, therefore, had to wait before taking on Tanzania in a tough clash away in front of 60,000 in Dar es Salaam but won 2-0 with Hakim Ziyech's long-range shot and a second-half own goal.

Standings and results on page 90.

Top of Group D...Brentford's Bryan Mbeumo scored in Cameroon's 3-0 win against Mauritius in Douala

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Super six

Asia's six representatives from Qatar 2022 have all made strong starts to their 2026 World Cup qualifying campaigns

After two games of the second round of 2026 World Cup qualifying in Asia, the story has been mainly about the big boys getting the job done with few problems. Of the six teams that played at the 2022 tournament, five have six points from six with a combined total of just a single goal conceded.

It was always possible given that the giants don't meet at this stage, which sees the top two from each of the nine four-team groups advance to the third phase. There will be eight finals spots (twice as many as usual) up for grabs at that stage, when the tension and the drama will move up a notch.

There wasn't much of either in Japan's successive 5-0 wins over Myanmar and then Syria. Feyenoord forward Ayase Ueda scored half of those as the Samurai Blue extended their winning streak to eight without breaking sweat. Beating Myanmar was no surprise – the score was 10-0 in 2010 – but the emphatic win over Syria, played in the Saudi Arabian port city of Jeddah for security reasons, was an impressive result.

As was South Korea's 3-0 win in China. The Taegeuk Warriors thrashed Singapore 5-0 in front of 64,000 in Seoul but knew that facing Team Dragon in Shenzhen, a long goal-kick away from Hong Kong, would be a different opposition especially after a physical China won 2-1 in Thailand.

In the end though, it was comfortable. Tottenham Hotspur's Son Heung-min scored twice and made the other to silence the noisy home crowd. The gulf in class was there for all to see with the likes of Son, Wolves' Hwang Hee-chan, PSG's Lee Kang-in and Bayern Munich's Kim Min-jae just too good for the hosts. With these players on form, it is hard to say just how good a job coach Jurgen Klinsmann is doing, because very few teams in Asia can cope against such talent. China are, just about, still on course for the next stage.

Australia have not been quite so fluid but also have maximum points with no goals conceded. Big Leicester City defender Harry Souttar has been the star, heading home the opener in the 7-0 victory over Bangladesh and then doing the same in a 1-0 win over Palestine in Kuwait City, played there for security reasons. Palestine had their

Joint-top scorer...Japan's Ayase Ueda notched five goals in two games, including a hat-trick against Myanmar

Flawless start... South Korea secured valuable wins against Singapore and China

Aerial dominance...Asian defences can't handle Australia centre-back Harry Souttar

chances and could have got something from the game but, like many others in Asia, struggled to handle the aerial threat posed by Souttar, who now has a staggering ten goals in 21 international appearances.

Saudi Arabia have a 100 per cent record too. A 4-0 win over Pakistan gave Roberto Mancini his first victory since arriving in August, helped by two goals from Saleh Al Shehri, the man who equalised against Argentina in the 2022 World Cup. The same striker scored two more in the 2-0 win in Jordan to increase the pressure on the team's Moroccan coach Hussein Ammouta.

Of the six teams that played at the 2022 World Cup, five have six points from six with a combined total of just a single goal conceded

World Cup 2022 hosts Qatar are also looking very good. An 8-1 thrashing of Afghanistan was followed by a 3-0 win in India with Almoez Ali, top scorer in the 2019 Asian Cup, joining Ueda at the top of the scoring charts with five goals from two games. The victory on the subcontinent was a good one given that India had just returned from a 1-0 win in Kuwait City, 13 years after losing 9-1 to the same team. It is a measure of how far the Blue Tigers have come under Igor Stimac and the path to the final round of qualification for the first time ever is open.

Iran are the only powerhouse to drop points but that is not a huge surprise given their second game, which followed the opening 4-0 win over Hong Kong, was in Uzbekistan against a team that has ambitions of qualifying themselves. Iran threw away a 2-0 lead in Tashkent but are still top with four points after it ended 2-2.

Iraq have not been to the World Cup since 1986 but have started brightly with a 5-1 win over Indonesia followed by a battling 1-0 victory in Vietnam to move clear at the top.

The surprise packages are Malaysia. The Tigers have won both games, coming back in the final 18 minutes to turn 3-1 down into a 4-3 win against Kyrgyzstan and then followed that up with a 1-0 win away to Chinese Taipei. With Oman, the top seed in the group, losing 1-0 in Kyrgyzstan in the second game, it means Malaysia are three points clear.

The other surprise has come in the form of Bangladesh, the second lowest-ranked team in the round down at 183, who picked up a battling point at home to Lebanon. With the big boys cleaning up, that may be as good as it gets.

Standings and results on page 90.

CONCACAF

JAMES NALTON

The final four

USA, Mexico, Jamaica and Panama advance to the 2024 CONCACAF Nations League finals

Dismissed...United States defender Sergino Dest (R) was sent off against Trinidad & Tobago

Mexico's saviour ...Edson Alvarez scored a vital goal against Honduras

As the CONCACAF Nations League A reached the quarter-final stage, there was much more at stake than merely a place in the semi-finals. These ties across two legs determined which nations would be on the guest list for the 2024 Copa America, the CONMEBOL competition hosted next summer by the United States. With invites for six CONCACAF teams available, this was an opportunity for these non-South American nations to compete in the oldest and one of the most prestigious international tournaments in the world.

With the 2026 World Cup to be held across Canada, Mexico and the US in 2026, it is also a chance for CONCACAF's leading nations to see some competitive action. For any of this trio, not qualifying for the 2024 Copa would be a real blow to their World Cup preparations and signal a worrying lack of progress, so these Nations League quarter-finals had an extra edge.

There is the safety net of a Copa America play-off in March between the four losing teams, but for any of those World Cup hosts, ending up in that last chance saloon would be deemed a failure. Each were among the top-four ranked teams in CONCACAF at the start of the campaign, along with Costa Rica. This status saw all four avoid any group-stage play and advance straight to the quarter-finals. They were eventually joined by Panama and Trinidad & Tobago from Group A, and Jamaica and Honduras from Group B.

Costa Rica were seen off easily by Panama, unsurprisingly given Panama's impressive showing in the 2023 Gold Cup where they finished runners-up. In terms of meeting expectations and occasionally surpassing them with minimal fuss, Panama will be the most content team in CONCACAF and may spring a surprise or two against South American teams in the Copa America.

They will face-off against Mexico in March's Nations League semi-finals – a rematch of the Gold Cup final in which the Mexicans narrowly triumphed. *El Tri* did just about enough in their own quarter-final against Honduras, but would have hoped for a more convincing performance as they looked to build on that Gold Cup success. Down 2-0 following a first-leg defeat in Tegucigalpa, it took an Edson Alvarez goal in the 11th minute of added time in the return leg at the Estadio Azteca to make it 2-2 and keep them in the tie, which they eventually won 4-2 on penalties.

USA faced the seemingly simpler task of facing Trinidad & Tobago – who were only in League A because the team originally promoted from League B, Nicaragua, were barred from progressing after fielding an ineligible player in last year's tournament. But ghosts of 2017, when the USA only needed to

Review

down and was inevitably shown two yellow cards in quick succession.

Reon Moore scored before half-time to give Trinidad & Tobago a glimmer of hope, and a second-half free-kick from Alvin Jones beat Matt Turner from distance, but the scoring ended there. Another 2-1 defeat for the USA in Trinidad, but that flurry of late goals in the first leg saved them.

For Canada, there was no such saving grace. Having won the first leg against Jamaica 2-1 in Kingston, a second-half collapse in Toronto led to a 3-2 defeat and an aggregate score of 4-4, with Jamaica progressing on away goals. The Reggae Boyz will now take their talented squad, who made the semi-finals of the Gold Cup, to the Copa America.

Canada's rise in recent years appears to have hit the rocks. The defeat to Jamaica means no place in the Nations League final four and they will now have to get past Trinidad & Tobago in the play-off if they are to make the Copa America.

In League B, Nicaragua bounced back from that ineligible player incident by dominating Group B with five wins, a draw, 17 goals scored and just one conceded to finally play in League A next year.

Guadeloupe were promoted from Group A and Guyana from Group D while Group C was a tight affair where promotion and relegation were only decided in the final games. French Guiana defeated Bermuda 3-0 to secure promotion while Saint Vincent & the Grenadines jumped off the bottom of the table with a 3-0 win versus Belize to avoid relegation and send their opponents down to League C instead.

Saint Martin and Aruba were the standout teams in League C. Both finished with perfect records in their respective groups and will be joined in the move up to League B by Dominica and Bonaire.

Nations League attention now turns to the finals in March when Panama go into their semi against Mexico as the highest-seeded team based on quarter-final results, while the USA face that talented Jamaica team. In the same week, there will also be eyes on what is now a vital Copa America play-off for Canada.

Standings and results on page 93.

These ties across two legs determined which nations would be on the guest list for the 2024 Copa America

Match winner... Bobby Decordova-Reid scored Jamaica's decisive goal v Canada

draw in Trinidad & Tobago to qualify for the Russia World Cup but lost 2-1, still linger in these parts, and haunted them once more.

Having won the first leg 3-0 in Austin, Texas, thanks to three late goals, the second leg should have been a simple task for the USA, especially when Antonee Robinson put them 1-0 up in Port of Spain.

It began to fall apart just before half-time when right-back Sergino Dest, who had done so well to assist Robinson's goal, was guilty of repeated acts of dissent towards referee Walter Lopez. Dest ignored calls from his team-mates to calm

United States

JAMES NALTON

Columbus Crew crowned MLS champions

Wilfried Nancy's entertaining side win deserved MLS Cup

MLS Cup winners ...Columbus Crew lift the trophy

Columbus Crew defeated Los Angeles FC in the 2023 edition of Major League Soccer's showpiece game, lifting their third MLS Cup, and second in four years.

This MLS Cup final was an intriguing clash of styles: the pressing and counter-attacking of LAFC and the fearless possession with purpose of Columbus. It made for a classic, highly anticipated finale to round off an eventful season for the league.

It was a season in which Lionel Messi arrived and starred briefly, but all the while, away from Messi Mania, Columbus Crew grew steadily in stature and profile, as an increasing number of onlookers cottoned on to this fascinating team. In a division that has 29 teams, it can be difficult to cut through the noise and stand out, but Wilfried Nancy's side eventually managed it, peaking in the post-season despite failing to claim regular season honours. Not only that, they implemented the kind of style and overall philosophy that attracted glances from outside the confines of MLS. They transcended the league.

The Crew built on a regular season that saw them finish third in the overall standings. The hint that something special could be around the corner in the play-offs lay in the goals scored column, which at 67 was the highest in MLS.

By the end of the MLS Cup final, which they won 2-1, the Crew's 82 goals across the regular season and play-offs were the most in league history from an MLS Cup-winning side.

The Columbus style is possession-based but not ponderous, with high pressing in defence when the situation calls for it. It is proactive rather than reactive and doesn't care much for

MLS Cup-winning coach...Wilfried Nancy

Title-winning goal...Yaw Yeboah scores in the final

game-state, remaining on-brand whether winning or losing. It requires an element of bravery on the ball, instilled by Nancy whose focus is on the performance rather than the result.

"We played our way, I'm so proud," Nancy said in an interview with MLS Season Pass on the pitch amid post-match elation. "Yes, we won, but as a coach, for me, the most important thing is not about winning. The idea is to have a clear vision and create a connection with people and as a team."

The two Columbus goals epitomised this vision. There was quick, incisive passing through midfield in the lead up to a penalty won for the opening goal, converted by MLS Cup MVP Cucho Hernandez, while the build-up play for the second was Nancy's Crew in a nutshell, with Malte Amundsen providing a memorable through-ball for goalscorer Yaw Yeboah at the end of a passing move that traversed the entire pitch.

The Frenchman previously showcased elements of his coaching and management style during his time in charge of the Montreal Impact, taking over from Thierry Henry in 2021 at the Canadian club, where he had previously been an assistant and had coached at their academy. As a head coach, he quickly gained a reputation on the back of an emerging version of his football philosophy.

Under Nancy, CF Montreal enjoyed their best-ever league finish in 2022. One year later, this style was winning the cup for Columbus who acquired his services ahead of the 2023 campaign.

While the Crew could count themselves the most entertaining team, Supporters' Shield winners and fellow Ohioans FC Cincinnati were undoubtedly the best team during the 2023 regular season. And it was Cincinnati who gave Columbus their biggest test in the play-offs.

The pair faced off in the Eastern Conference final. This intrastate rivalry is dubbed the "Hell Is Real" derby, uniquely named after a sign on Interstate 71 that connects the cities.

Conference finals can vary in magnitude and profile, especially with the regular season having already determined the best and most consistent team, but this game had something about it.

It felt like a final in itself. Being a derby helped, as did the story of the game. Cincinnati took a 2-0 lead, but Columbus managed to level the scores in normal time before scoring a dramatic winner in extra-time. The Supporters' Shield winners were knocked out by the eventual MLS Cup winners, with the rivalry and success further enhancing the reputation of soccer in Ohio.

Over in the West, LAFC dispatched US Open Cup winners Houston Dynamo in the conference final. It didn't have the edge of the eastern equivalent, but it was still a cup winner versus a potential cup winner.

> "We played our way, I'm so proud"
> Columbus Crew coach Wilfried Nancy

Though they got to the final, it was a disappointing campaign for LAFC overall as they finished eighth in the MLS standings and lost in the CONCACAF Champions League final as well as the MLS Cup. They do, though, remain one of the flagship, modern clubs in MLS, with a vibrant supporters scene, a talented team, and one of the league's best players in Denis Bouanga. It's no accident they reached two finals, but they lacked the edge and excellence that saw them win both the Supporters' Shield and MLS Cup in 2022.

Columbus, meanwhile, under Nancy's guidance alongside their own history of fan activism and success, themselves have a case to be labelled the flagship MLS team. The Crew will have been revered for their play this season even without an MLS Cup win, but the trophy at the end adds something tangible to support the theory and philosophy. One they will continue to practise as champions in 2024.

Full play-off results on page 97.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Luciano Acosta (FC Cincinnati)
The Argentine all-round attacker and creator was the clear standout player in 2023, demonstrated when he took over 80 per cent of the media vote for the league's official MVP award, and by 19 goals and 12 assists across the regular season and play-offs.

Player of the Year...Luciano Acosta

COACH OF THE YEAR
Wilfried Nancy (Columbus Crew)
Judging on the regular season alone, this award would definitely go to Pat Noonan of FC Cincinnati, but the momentum gained by Columbus Crew to win the MLS Cup in the manner they did means Nancy deserves recognition.

YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR
John Tolkin (New York Red Bulls)
The left-back from Chatham, New Jersey, was a shining light in an otherwise indifferent season for the Red Bulls. Already a talisman for his team at just 21, he also scored a Messi-esque free-kick in the play-offs.

Japan

MIKE PLASTOW

Vissel Kobe end 20-year wait

The Japanese club finally win the J. League title two decades after being taken over

Vissel Kobe won their first-ever J. League championship with a game to spare, eventually finishing seven points clear of defending champions Yokohama F. Marinos. It was only Kobe's second major silverware, following the 2019 Emperor's Cup, and made them the 11th different team to win the league.

The victory held special satisfaction for the Kobe fans and their owner Hiroshi Mikitani. In the Rakuten CEO's 20-year tenure, the club had never come close to winning the title, despite a number of high-profile signings including Lukas Podolski, David Villa and Andres Iniesta funded by significant investment.

Kobe manager Takayuki Yoshida, who abandoned last season's high-possession football in favour of a more direct approach, also had plenty to celebrate. "I have been with Vissel Kobe since my final years as a player," said Yoshida. "It was always my goal to win the league for Mr. Mikitani and now, after 14 years at the club in total, that day has arrived."

Yoshida described Kobe's success as a triumph of perseverance following last season's disappointments when the club even flirted with relegation. "Looking back last year the pressure not to lose was immense," Yoshida said. "This season, the pressure has been enormous at the top. I have now seen how stressful life is at both ends of the table. We owe this result to the fact that nobody buckled under it."

Kobe combined tight defending with swift counter-attacks. They led from the front and were top of the table more often than not all year. Kobe were the league's second-highest scorers after Yokohama F. Marinos, and had the third-best defensive record after Urawa Reds and Sanfrecce Hiroshima. Yuya Osako, who had plenty to prove after being dropped for the 2022 World Cup, was joint-top scorer with Yokohama's Anderson Lopes on 22 goals apiece.

Osako at centre-forward and fellow striker Yoshinori Muto were rejuvenated by Yoshida's switch to direct, attacking football. Both players joined Kobe when they returned to Japan from Europe in the summer of 2021, Osako from Werder Bremen and Muto from Newcastle United, but made little impact as Kobe struggled all through 2022. Few could have anticipated their turnaround in 2023.

Japanese champions... Yuya Osako and Yoshinori Muto lift the J. League title

Redemption ...Vissel's Yuya Osako missed the 2022 World Cup

Full-backs Gotoku Sakai and Ryo Hatsuse also shone in the new attack-minded formation, as did 24-year-old attacking midfielder Daiju Sasaki, who became increasingly influential as the season progressed. Other standout players included veteran holding midfielder Hotaru Yamaguchi and goalkeeper Daiya Maekawa, son of the former Japan keeper, Kazuya Maekawa, who made his long-awaited national team debut in November.

Largely lacking from all this was the foreign contingent. Iniesta racked up only 95 minutes of playing time before leaving in July and was replaced by Juan Mata, who played ten minutes. Sergi Samper (no appearances) and Stefan Mugosa (two minutes) also left in the summer, Balint Vecsei (22 minutes) joined in September, while Lincoln and Phelipe Megiolaro remained largely phantom presences on the bench. Centre-back Matheus Thuler, a new signing in April, was the honourable exception and played masterfully to the finish, while another Brazilian, striker Jean Patrick, also made important contributions from the bench. Yet overall, 2023 was the year when Vissel Kobe's biggest stars were Japanese.

Defending champions Yokohama F. Marinos made a bright start to the campaign by winning the Super Cup and then beating 2022 runners-up Kawasaki Frontale in the J. League opener, playing the same high-tempo attacking football that brought them the title in 2022.

Six months later, however, Yokohama manager Kevin Muscat was already musing that the J. League had changed enormously. "Many teams have become more aggressive this year," Muscat said after the FC Tokyo match in August. "They are passing faster. Two or three teams played this way last season. Now, it's more than half of the league. This is exciting for me and the staff. We now have to find new ways to win."

Overtaken ...Yokohama F. Marinos boss Kevin Muscat

Vissel Kobe quickly stood out. The only club to win their first three league games of the season, they stayed top until the summer. They did slip up – 1-0 at home to Urawa Reds in March and 3-2 at home to Yokohama F. Marinos in April – but secured revenge victories against both teams in the second half of the season.

Vissel Kobe combined tight defending with swift counter-attacks. They led from the front and were top of the table more often than not all year

Reflecting afterwards on the long season, Muscat pinpointed consistency as the key difference that underpinned Kobe's success.

For Urawa, 2023 was a remarkable, tantalising season that included winning their third Asian Champions League title in May under new manager Maciej Skorza. The promise was there but the J. League title, still won only once back in 2006, remained out of reach.

Kawasaki, the giants of the previous six seasons alongside Yokohama, struggled with a horrendous injury list and had to be satisfied with a mid-table finish. They did, however, win the Emperor's Cup, where they beat Kashiwa Reysol in a dramatic penalty shootout that went down to the goalkeepers.

Other teams who did well in 2023 included quick-pressing Sanfrecce Hiroshima and unheralded Avispa Fukuoka. Hiroshima remained in distant contention for most of the year and eventually leap-frogged Urawa to finish third, while Fukuoka won their first-ever major trophy, the J. League Cup, 2-1 against Urawa in November.

This year's departures include veteran Brazilian boss Nelsinho Baptista, sacked by struggling Kashiwa Reysol in May, who first arrived in the country back in 1995 at Verdy Kawasaki and won the league with Kashiwa in 2011. Shinji Ono, one of Japan's all-time greats, finally hung up his boots at the age of 44 at Hokkaido Consadole Sapporo.

Yokohama FC, the defending champions' cross-town rivals, filled this year's sole relegation spot, while rising Tokyo club Machida Zelvia, who only joined the J. League in 2012, clinched the Second Division title. Two former J. League champions, Jubilo Iwata and Tokyo Verdy, as Verdy Kawasaki's heirs, were promoted with them. Next season, the top flight will be expanded from 18 to 20 teams.

Final standings on page 96.

SEASON'S BEST

MANAGER OF THE YEAR
Takayuki Yoshida (Vissel Kobe)
Yoshida had the vision and courage to change Kobe's game and led them higher than they had ever been before.

Title-winning coach...Yoshida

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Yuya Osako (Vissel Kobe)
The veteran centre-forward won the J. League in his first season with Kashima Antlers in 2009. Now back in Japan after seven years in Germany, his goals steered Kobe to their first-ever league title.

YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Shunsuke Mito (Albirex Niigata)
The 21-year-old midfielder is a deft, hard-running dribbler who scores goals. He has represented Japan at every level from Under-15 to the current Under-22 team.

South Korea

JOHN DUERDEN

Review

Back-to-back titles for Ulsan Hyundai

Hong Myung-bo's side stroll to second K-League title in a row, but all the drama was at the opposite end of the table

The 2023 K-League season was a tale of two halves in South Korea. It always is, given that the 12-team top tier splits into two after 33 games of the campaign and then there are two mini-tables for the remaining five games. This time, the action at the bottom was a great deal more exciting and shocking than that at the top as Ulsan Hyundai strolled to a second successive title, 12 points clear of Pohang Steelers.

The deal was sealed with three games to spare thanks to a 2-0 win over Daegu FC in late October. It was another success for Hong Myung-bo. The captain of the 2002 World Cup semi-finalists looked to have been building a fine career as a coach as he led the Under-20 team to the quarter-finals of the 2009 World Cup and then the U23 team to bronze at the 2012 London Olympics. That meant he was fast-tracked into the vacant hot seat

Title-winning goal...Ulsan's Kim Min-hyeok celebrates after scoring in the decisive win v Daegu FC *Credit: Alamy*

of the senior side for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, a tournament that ended with one single point, lots of criticism and, so it seemed, the end of a promising coaching career.

Hong spent time working in the Korea Football Association but returned to the sidelines to take over Ulsan in 2021. He has now restored his reputation with successive K-League titles with a club that had won two previously back in 1996 and 2005.

"Personally, I don't have special feelings. My job is to help my club and players enjoy success the best I can," Hong said as the championship was clinched. "I am obviously happy to have won the second straight title here, and I'd like to dedicate this title to our players and supporters."

Ulsan led from the get-go with two six-game winning streaks putting them clear and providing enough of a cushion over Pohang in second that they could deal with a few hiccups later on. Fans responded and the club's average crowd was not far short of 20,000 – not bad given that the ground, which was built for the 2002 World Cup, is in a far from central location. All in all, attendances have been growing across the league with an average of almost 11,000.

> **Ulsan led from the get-go with two six-game winning streaks putting them clear**

"We played well early in the year but ran into some difficulties of late. But our players never lost their focus, and we were able to capture our title on home turf," Hong said. "I think we're becoming a truly national club. Our supporters have stuck with us through ups and downs."

The main reason Ulsan found it so comfortable was that their usual rivals Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors fell away, with the nine-time champions finishing outside the top two for the first time in ten years. Dan Petrescu got the job in early June but the well-travelled Romanian, who has coached in Russia, Poland, Qatar, the UAE, China and Turkey, failed to inspire a title challenge.

The talk of the top half was Gwangju FC, a newly-promoted club that finished third. Coach Lee Jung-hyo relished his team's status as underdogs, saying that as results continued to impress the handshakes from fellow bosses became firmer. "Well, I guess we're not supposed to be here," Lee said just a month before the end. "This only motivates us. And this kind of disrespect is exactly why we are where we are right now."

At the bottom, the big story was the relegation of Suwon Samsung Bluewings. The four-time champions and two-time continental winners have slowly fallen from the top as Samsung handed the club to their marketing arm in Cheil Worldwide. Investment has fallen, as has the club.

They looked dead and buried at the end of September after five straight defeats left them bottom. Ten points from five games in October and November gave them a fighting chance after a 1-0 win at bitter rivals FC Seoul put them level on points with neighbours Suwon FC and one behind Gangwon. It meant that victory in the final game would lift the Bluewings off the bottom and into the relegation play-offs but it ended 0-0 with Jeju United and that was that.

Player-coach Yeom Ki-hun took the caretaker job in September and talked about the falling investment. The club legend also took the players onto the pitch to apologise to fans, though it seemed the supporters – who used to generate some of the best atmosphere in Asia at the Suwon World Cup Stadium – were not ready to accept such a gesture and made their anger known.

It remains to be seen if Suwon Bluewings are ready to regroup, recover and then return to the top to challenge the likes of Ulsan.

Final standings on page 96.

SEASON'S BEST

MANAGER OF THE YEAR
Lee Jung-hyo (Gwangju FC)
Took newly-promoted and unfashionable Gwangju FC to third, above south-western rivals and powerhouse Jeonbuk, and into the Asian Champions League preliminary round.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Kim Young-gwon (Ulsan Hyundai)
The veteran 100-cap centre-back barely put a foot wrong on the pitch and was also a real leader throughout the campaign.

Hwang Jae-won... top talent

YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Hwang Jae-won (Daegu FC)
The 21-year-old right-back was up and down the wing all season for Daegu. Tigerish in the tackle and always eager to get forward.

Title mastermind...Ulsan Hyundai manager Hong Myung-bo

Player-coach... Yeom Ki-hun failed to keep Suwon Bluewings up

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Limp start for African Football League

Inaugural competition doesn't live up to Gianni Infantino's grand vision for the African club game

Review

Gianni Infantino hailed it as the future of the game on the continent but the first effort at an African super league proved a far cry from what was originally promised, and the jury is very much out after the rapid-fire inaugural edition.

"This is what African football needs: the best playing together more often in a top professional environment," declared the FIFA president after South Africa's Mamelodi Sundowns triumphed in the inaugural final.

The Pretoria club belongs to Patrice Motsepe, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) president and Infantino acolyte, who has faithfully backed Infantino's vision of a super league and bought into the belief that it could remedy the financial woes of the club game on the continent.

But there are few other disciples

Final showdown... Sundowns' Teboho Mokoena jumps with Wydad's Zakaria Draoui in the second leg of the AFL final

Inaugural winners... Mamelodi Sundowns hold aloft the trophy

after the competition, which admittedly had fulsome crowds but attracted only limited sponsorship and no new television deals.

Were it not for FIFA money bankrolling the event, and offering Infantino a chance to save face, it is highly unlikely the tournament would ever have got off the ground.

Infantino had promised, when he first floated the idea, that a super league would attract millions of dollars, thereby changing the fortunes of Africa's top clubs, who would be able to offer the kind of financial inducements that would end the talent drain to Europe and resultantly strengthen the standard of the game on the continent.

But only tourist authorities Visit Saudi and Visit Rwanda signed on as sponsors, with Macron becoming the official ball partner for the competition, while the continent's biggest sports broadcaster, SuperSport, did not buy the television rights.

It is promised that the tournament will be expanded next year. The original vision was a 24-team competition, but the African Football League started with only eight and was no league at all, rather a speedily completed knockout competition that lasted 24 days from start to finish.

The money on offer was a windfall for the eight clubs, who barely had their domestic programme disrupted and now have a tidy kitty of cash to use for the rigours of the African Champions League, which still carries more gravitas.

Sundowns won $4 million in prize money, the same that is on offer to the Champions League winners next May, but with much less exertion and expense. Runners-up Wydad Casablanca received $2.8m, which is $800,000 more than the beaten Champions League finalists receive.

The four sides eliminated at the first hurdle in the quarter-finals – Simba of Tanzania, DR Congo's TP Mazembe, Enyimba of Nigeria and Angola's Petro Atletico – received $900,000 for their two matches. These sums are massive in the African game, but whether FIFA will continue to fork out this kind of cash annually for what remains a vanity project remains to be seen.

> **Were it not for FIFA money bankrolling the event, it is highly unlikely the tournament would ever have got off the ground**

Sundowns won the trophy on home turf in Pretoria after a two-legged final. In the first leg in Casablanca, Wydad won 2-1 in front of a customary packed-out Mohamed V Stadium that produced an ear-blasting wall of intimidatory sound. The hosts went ahead early on after Sundowns defender Rivaldo Coetzee slid the ball into his own net, but then gave away a penalty 16 minutes from time to allow the South African champions to equalise. It took a stunning shot from substitute wing-back Anas Serrhat to give the Moroccans a slender lead for the return leg.

Sundowns created a special atmosphere of their own: supporters were allowed in for free as long as they were wearing the club's distinctive Brazilian-style yellow shirts, so there was a canary-coloured sea of support at Loftus Versfeld to see Peter Shalulile and Aubrey Modiba score the goals in a polished 2-0 win and a 3-2 aggregate triumph.

Sundowns had overcome Egyptian giants, and Champions League holders, Al Ahly in the semi-final with a single goal separating the two sides over the two legs, while Wydad got the better of Esperance of Tunisia on penalties after their semi ended 1-1 on aggregate.

The tournament kicked off in Dar es Salaam, where there is always the guarantee of a large crowd whenever the local favourites play, and Simba's game against Al Ahly produced four goals to set the competition off to a good start.

There is no fan revulsion at the idea of an African super league, as there was when similar plans were floated in Europe, but plenty of scepticism as to whether it will be as grandiose as Infantino would have us believe.

Full results on page 97.

FIFA-backed tournament...Gianni Infantino presents the trophy to Sundowns skipper Themba Zwane

Norway

JOSH BUTLER

Review

A season of surprises

Other than Bodo/Glimt lifting their third title in four years, the 2023 Norwegian season was full of unexpected twists

With winter embracing Norway in its freezing arms once again, Eliteserien football in 2023 came to an end having witnessed record attendances across the entire division following supporters' increasing rejection of the English Premier League in favour of their own top flight.

As many predicted, the title returned to the Arctic Circle for the third time since 2019. Kjetil Knutsen's all-conquering Bodo/Glimt team had slackened their grip on Norway's top division last season, allowing Molde to clinch their fifth championship, but reclaimed their crown with a few games to spare.

Installed as early title favourites, Bodo/Glimt still had to overcome the loss of key players Hugo Vetlesen and Joel Mvuka (the former commanding a €7.5 million fee to join Club Brugge) and ride out a summer wobble where they were defeated 2-0 at home by arch-rivals Tromso and succumbed to a dramatic defeat in Stavanger to erstwhile title challengers Viking. Inspired by the likes of Albert Gronbaek, Patrick Berg and the irrepressible Amahl Pellegrino, Glimt's unbeaten run between August and November essentially confirmed their status as 2023 title winners.

But if the champions were somewhat easy to predict, the rest of the league was anything but. Viking, one of Norway's largest clubs and without championship success since 1991, spent exuberantly in pre-season, and the gamble seemed to have paid off. After 23 rounds, they were sitting top of the league having comfortably beaten rivals Brann both home and away, dispatched Bodo/Glimt in a thrilling 3-2 back-and-forth encounter, and scored on average 2.2 goals per game. Rumours abounded that the club had even commissioned their end-of-season title song, before four defeats and a draw in October-early November thwarted their title charge, and it never recovered. By season-end, they had not just fallen out of the title race but the European places entirely, finishing fourth behind the division's two surprise packages: Brann and Tromso.

Brann had just been promoted back to Eliteserien following years

Champions ...Bodo/Glimt players celebrate with the trophy
Credit: Alamy

Surprise packages...Brann

of turmoil that had led to the club finally succumbing to relegation in 2021 but, rather than sapping them of impetus, it seemed to invigorate them. Not only did they win the 2022 edition of the Norwegian Cup in May, they finished as league runners-up – their highest position since they were last champions in 2007. Eirik Horneland, who reluctantly agreed to graduate from assistant coach to full-time manager in 2021, spent shrewdly in the summer and retained much of his second-tier title-winning team, including the undeniable talents of striker Bard Finne, who finished the season with 16 goals and nine assists.

Elsewhere, Eliteserien's other Arctic Circle residents, Tromso, who themselves had only been promoted back to the top flight in 2020, improved upon last year's seventh-place finish to ensure European football will return to the Romssa Arena for the first time in a decade. Manager Gaute Helstrup, who has masterminded their recent ascent, has assembled a hungry, youthful side and discovered a real gem in Vegard Erlien. The 25-year-old forward joined from second-tier Ranheim on a free transfer at the start of the year and netted 15 goals as Tromso secured their highest points total and the bronze medal on the final day of the season after a 1-1 draw away at Valerenga.

If the champions were somewhat easy to predict, the rest of the league was anything but

One of Norway's biggest clubs and the capital city's main draw, Valerenga dramatically went down to the second tier after losing the relegation play-off on penalties against Kristiansund, having thrown away a 2-0 first-leg lead and initially only just avoiding the two direct relegation places, occupied by a Bob Bradley-coached Stabaek and a truly hapless Aalesund. Reeling from the loss of precocious starlets Osame Sahraoui (to Heerenveen) and Odin Thiago Holm (Celtic), Valerenga stumbled through a tricky start to the campaign before plummeting down the table thanks to an utterly ignominious summer period. After sacking Dag-Eilev Fagermo in June, they poached Geir Bakke from nemeses Lillestrom – whose supporters responded by hanging an effigy of their departed coach during the 2-0 win over Valerenga in October – but even a late rally in November was not enough to save them. Lessons may need to be learnt from Bodo/Glimt, Tromso and Brann, all of whom have rebuilt better than before after suffering relegation.

However, Valerenga were not the only Norwegian giants who endured a disappointing campaign. Up in Trondheim, 26-time champions Rosenborg never really got their bloated squad to gel and finished ninth, while reigning champions Molde could only labour to a very distant fifth place. Tradition, it seems, was of scant importance.

Final standings on page 96.

Underachievers ...Rosenborg

SEASON'S BEST

MANAGER OF THE YEAR
Eirik Horneland (Brann)
Kjetil Knutsen deserves plaudits for helping Bodo/Glimt regain the title, but Horneland has to take the accolade after guiding Brann from promotion to unlikely runners-up.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Amahl Pellegrino (Bodo/Glimt)
With 24 goals and 14 assists, the 33-year-old forward was the division's stand-out performer.

Player of the Year ...Amahl Pellegrino hugs team-mate Albert Gronbaek

YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Sverre Nypan (Rosenborg)
Several young players flourished, including Tromso's Jakob Napoleon Romsaas and Sandefjord defender Vetle Walle Egeli, but Rosenborg's 16-year-old looks set to emerge as the country's next coveted star.

	LEAGUE CHAMPIONS	TOP SCORER	BEST OF THE REST
Belarus PREMIER LEAGUE	**Dinamo Minsk** led from the start to win their first league title since 2004. Belarus' most dominant club in the 1990s, Dinamo have slipped behind BATE Borisov over the past 20 years but enjoyed a highly consistent season, winning 13 of their last 16 games.	Picked up on a free transfer from Isloch ahead of the start of the season, **Vladislav Morozov** was an inspired signing for the champions with 16 goals. The 23-year-old earned a first call-up for Belarus, and scored twice in Euro 2024 qualifying.	Winners of the last three titles, Shakhtyor Soligorsk narrowly avoided going down after being hit with a 35-point penalty for match-fixing. Bottom club Belshina were also docked points, as were Energetik-BGU Minsk who then lost the relegation play-off.
Estonia MEISTRILIIGA	**Flora** of Tallinn won their second league title in a row and 15th in total. With four games left they were level with FCI Levadia. Neither side finished convincingly, but Flora's record of two wins, one draw and a loss gave them the title by two points.	Trans finished eighth out of ten, but may have been even lower without **Tristan Koskor**'s 16 goals, two of which came in a stunning 4-1 win at the champions. Flora's veteran attack of Konstantin Vassiljev (aged 39) and Sergei Zenjov (34) scored 26 between them.	The 2023 Estonian Cup final took place back in June, in time for the winners to take part in the first round of Conference League qualifiers. Trans beat Flora 2-1 to lift the trophy, but didn't score a goal in Europe and then struggled in the league.
Faroe Islands PREMIER LEAGUE	**KI Klaksvik** won plaudits for their exploits in the Conference League, but that didn't hinder them winning their third league title in a row. In July they had a 12-point cushion at the top, but that gap shrunk as European distractions set in.	Pall Klettskard finished as the champions' top scorer for the third year in a row, notching 17, but that wasn't enough to catch Vikingur midfielder **Solvi Vatnhamar**. Eight of the 37-year-old's 21 goals came in two four-goal hauls.	Vikingur should be geared up to challenge for the 2024 title after ending the season with an impressive 13-game winning streak, which catapulted them from a distant fourth to KI's nearest challengers in second place.
Finland VEIKKAUSLIIGA	The top two met on the final day of the season in a dramatic showdown. Trailing by three points, KuPS needed to win by three clear goals to wrest the title away from Helsinki, but could only manage a 2-1 win as **HJK** made it four titles in a row.	A graduate of Brighton's academy, 23-year-old striker **Bojan Radulovic** averaged a goal every 94 minutes to top the league's scoring charts with 18, one more than VPS's Nigerian striker Peter Michael who was in his first year in Finland.	Despite reaching the finals of both the Finnish Cup and the European play-offs, FC Honka will play in the fourth tier in 2024 after declaring bankruptcy. They will take over the place of their Academy team in the Kakkonen division.
Georgia EROVNULI LIGA	**Dinamo Batumi** won the title in their centenary year, but they stumbled over the line with a margin of just three points. Even a 6-2 thrashing from second-placed Dinamo Tbilisi in the penultimate game couldn't prevent a second title in three years.	With 17 goals, the Golden Boot was shared by three players: Batumi's Brazilian forward **Flamarion**, Serb **Zoran Marusic** in his second spell at Dinamo Tbilisi, and Gagra's **Zurab Museliani**, who scored seven against bottom club Shukura on the final day.	A miserable season for Shukura ended with three consecutive 9-0 defeats. Plagued by financial troubles, the club had already been hit with a transfer ban and a points deduction when relegation was confirmed in October.
Iceland URVALSDEILD	**Vikingur Reykjavik** were totally dominant, effectively securing the title before the division split in two after winning 19 of their first 22 games. The deal was sealed with four games to spare with Valur unable to keep pace in the final Championship round.	Stjarnan striker **Emil Atlason** was the top scorer in the league with 17 goals, although he would have been challenged by Stefan Sigurdarson if the former Breidablik forward hadn't left for Belgian side Patro Eisden after scoring ten goals in 12 games.	After missing out on the 2022 title to Breidablik, Vikingur reasserted themselves as Iceland's top club in emphatic style, not only dominating the league but also winning the Icelandic Cup for the fourth year in a row to complete the double.

	LEAGUE CHAMPIONS	TOP SCORER	BEST OF THE REST
Kazakhstan PREMIER LEAGUE	**Ordabasy** is a club with a complex history, formed in 2000 as the result of two teams merging together. Typically a mid-table side, they won the cup in 2022 and built on that this year by winning their first-ever league title, seeing off traditional giants Astana.	35-year-old Brazilian veteran **Joao Paulo**, who first arrived in Kazakhstan back in 2019 as an Ordabasy player, was the league's top scorer with 17 goals, though that was not enough to fire his team, Kairat, into the top three and Europe.	Ordabasy were denied the double by Tobol, who beat them 1-0 in the cup final. Elsewhere, FC Yelimay, three-time Kazakh champions in the 1990s, will return to the top flight in 2024 after winning the second tier without losing a game.
Latvia VIRSLIGA	**RFS** won their second title in three years in dramatic fashion, leap-frogging neighbours Riga FC on the final day of the season to top the table by just one point. The two sides were well clear of the rest, finishing 30 points ahead of their nearest challenger.	24-year-old Latvia striker **Marko Regza** enjoyed a breakout season for Riga, bagging 19 goals for the runners-up. With 14 strikes, Serbian forward Andrej Ilic would have run him close if he hadn't left RFS for Norwegian side Valerenga in August.	The two Riga clubs also went head-to-head in the cup final in another tense finish. Trailing 1-0 for the entire second half, RFS equalised in stoppage-time, but eventually lost 5-3 in the penalty shootout.
Lithuania A LYGA	Formed in 2015 after the city's former club Ekranas folded, **Panevezys** secured their first-ever league title in style. They only lost once all season and finished 12 points ahead of runners-up Zalgiris, who had won the last three championships.	In his second season in Lithuania, Zalgiris' 24-year-old Nigerian forward **Mathias Oyewusi** clinched the league's Golden Boot with 19 goals, including a dramatic 97th-minute winner against champions Panevezys back in May.	Founded only in 2022, TransINVEST of Vilnius completed a rare double by winning the Lithuanian Cup and the second-tier title. Beating three top-flight sides en route to the cup, they will expect to compete at the top of next year's A Lyga.
Norway ELITESERIEN	A year after finishing a distant second to Molde, **Bodo/Glimt** returned to top spot, winning their third title in four years. Head coach Kjetil Knutsen continues to be linked with moves abroad, but for now remains committed to the club.	Bodo/Glimt forward **Amahl Pellegrino** topped the scoring charts for the second year in a row with 24 goals, one less than 2022. The forward was also the league's leading creator with 14 assists, yet continues to be overlooked by Norway.	Only Rosenborg have been crowned champions of Norway more times than Frederikstad, who returned to the top flight after a 12-year absence. An historic club, the last of their nine titles came way back in 1960-61.
Republic of Ireland PREMIER DIVISION	Stephen Bradley's era of dominance as head coach of **Shamrock Rovers** shows no sign of slowing down, as they won their fourth consecutive league title under their former player, who has rejected advances from English clubs.	After registering 15 goals from midfield for Shelbourne, **Jack Moylan** was signed by EFL League One side Lincoln City. The 22-year-old shared top spot in the scoring charts with Bohemians striker **Jonathan Afolabi**.	Galway United returned to the top flight for the first time since 2017, storming the second tier with 94 points from 36 games and 98 goals scored. Waterford will join them after beating Cork City in the promotion/relegation play-off.
Sweden ALLSVENSKAN	Sweden's title race also went down to a final-day shootout between the top two. Trailing Elfsborg by three points, **Malmo** had to win to reclaim the title after finishing seventh in 2022. In the end, the 1-0 scoreline didn't do their dominance justice.	Malmo's title-winning goal on the final day came from the penalty spot via the boot of **Isaac Thelin**, whose 16th goal of the campaign handed his team the title. A nomadic striker, Thelin joined Malmo in 2022 after a spell in the UAE.	One of Sweden's oldest clubs, GAIS, won their second promotion in a row to return to the top flight. They finished ahead of Utsiktens, who went into the play-offs against Brommapojkarna chasing a first-ever place in the top flight, but lost 7-0.

Compiled by Jamie Evans

Maldives

STEVE MENARY

Smalley hoping for big change

Paul Smalley, the Maldives' new technical director, is attempting to revive the fortunes of the Indian Ocean Island

Technical director ...Paul Smalley

Football in the Maldives is undergoing a reset after a monumentally disappointing 2023. The Indian Ocean Island have won the South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) Championship on two occasions, and finished third on home soil in 2021, but last summer they could not even get out of their group after losing two of their three games in India.

Former Roma and Internazionale winger Francesco Moriero was sacked as coach and the Maldives did not even enter the football at last August's Indian Ocean Games in Madagascar.

Local coach Ali Suzain took charge on an interim basis for the subsequent preliminary round of the 2026 World Cup qualifiers against Bangladesh, who had beaten the Maldives 3-1 in India and triumphed again 3-2 on aggregate.

"We see the disappointment and defeat as a springboard for strategic change and the evolution of the senior national team and football development in Maldives," says Paul Smalley, who took over as technical director in the summer after leaving the same post in Bangladesh. "What happened with SAFF and the World Cup qualifiers is the culmination of a lack of co-ordination. There have been poor appointments for a while."

The Football Association of the Maldives (FAM) has suffered from a poor relationship with the government, with promises of support not materialising, but the country's president Ibrahim Mohamed Solih was ousted in elections at the end of September. His replacement will be Mohamed Muizzu, the former mayor of the capital city of Male, whose Progressive Party have promised to back the FAM.

That support will be key to re-launching the national league in the New Year as part of a new 12-point strategic plan developed by Smalley to revitalise the game in the Maldives, which is home to half a million people.

> "We see the disappointment and defeat as a springboard for strategic change and the evolution of the senior national team"
>
> Maldives technical director Paul Smalley

The existing Dhiveni League will increase from eight clubs to between 12 and 14 teams and be regionalised to bring in sides from across the 26 atolls that make up the island chain. There are more than 30 full-size AstroTurf pitches with associated amenities across the atolls but, with little government assistance, clubs outside Male have suffered from lack of involvement with the capital.

"At the moment, it's very ad hoc but there are very good facilities," says Smalley, who adds: "The government will need to come to the table in terms of football in the atolls."

The league should start some time in the first quarter of 2024 with South, North and Central regions.

Smalley is hopeful that wider political change will boost the game. "The new government have said they will work with the FAM," he adds. "The challenge is transportation. The idea is to keep games in those regions so it doesn't impinge on time and finance."

A National Centre of Excellence has also been identified as a priority. Smalley says this may take time, but believes that the standard of the facilities will make setting up eight regional centres "quite easy" to mobilise youth academies.

With no permanent coach, the national team did not play in the November international break but will resume action in February, when a replacement for Moriero should be in place. "We need a foreign coach moving forward. It's the only way of changing the culture," says Smalley, who has signed a three-year deal and hopes to be part of that culture change.

Bangladesh... Smalley on the training pitch at his previous job

DECEMBER 22, 2023-JANUARY 20, 2024

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

Asian Cup kick-off

Holders and hosts Qatar kick things off in the 2023 Asian Cup on Friday, January 12, when they play Lebanon in Lusail. Among the standout fixtures in the competition's opening week are India seeking an upset against Australia in Group B and favourites Japan facing Vietnam in Group D. The final is on February 10, with a full review of the finals to follow in our April issue.

Hosts and holders ...Qatar will kick-off the 2023 Asian Cup

Spanish Super Cup

The RFEF has once again taken the Spanish Super Cup to Saudi Arabia. Taking part for the first time in their history are Osasuna, who face Barcelona on January 11, the day after Real Madrid take on rivals Atletico Madrid. All three games, including the final on January 14, will take place in the King Saud University Stadium in Riyadh. In last season's final, Barca defeated Real Madrid 3-1.

Spanish Super Cup ...Luka Modric after last season's final

AFCON kick-off

A day later than the Asian Cup, the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations kicks off at the Alassane Ouattara Stadium in Abidjan, with hosts Ivory Coast going head-to-head with Guinea-Bissau. Pre-tournament favourites and 2022 World Cup semi-finalists Morocco begin their campaign against Tanzania on January 17, the day before two heavyweight clashes: Ivory Coast v Nigeria in Group A and Egypt v Ghana in Group B. Senegal v Cameroon in Group C and Tunisia v Mali in Group E then swiftly follow, with the final on February 11. A comprehensive review of the tournament will be included in our April issue.

FA Cup

The weekend of the FA Cup third round is one of the most famous events in the English football calendar, and this year's standout tie is undoubtedly the heavyweight clash between Arsenal and Liverpool at the Emirates Stadium. The pick of the other action sees Sunderland host Newcastle United in the Tyne-Wear derby.

5 unmissable matches

- **Liverpool v Arsenal, December 23**
  Arsenal return to the ground where last season's Premier League title challenge began to falter. The Gunners would like to exorcise their Anfield demons having thrown away a two-goal lead there in April.
- **Sheffield United v Luton Town, December 26**
  Of all this year's Boxing Day fixtures in the Premier League, the bottom-of-the-table scrap between two of the newly-promoted clubs promises the most festive drama.
- **Juventus v Roma, December 30**
  Spoiling other teams' title aspirations is something of a speciality for Jose Mourinho, and he hopes to do it again when he takes the *Giallorossi* to Turin for a clash against a resurgent Juventus.

Pantomime villain...Mourinho in Turin back in 2018

- **Girona v Atletico Madrid, January 3**
  Another test for La Liga's unlikeliest title challengers Girona. The Catalan side have never beaten Atletico Madrid.
- **RB Leipzig v Bayer Leverkusen, January 20**
  A stern examination of Leverkusen's title credentials will come at Leipzig. Back in August, Xabi Alonso's charges overcame RB 3-2 on home soil.

Club World Cup

The final of the Club World Cup takes place on Friday, December 22. A full review of the tournament from Saudi Arabia – the last in its current seven-team format before a big revamp by FIFA ahead of the 32-team event in 2025 – will be included in *World Soccer's* February edition, along with a full review of South America's domestic league seasons which were unable to be covered in this issue due to the timing of our print deadlines.

Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

South America Section

● *6 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Nov 16 – La Paz
Bolivia 2 (H. Vaca 20, R. Vaca 87)
Peru 0
Bolivia: Viscarra – Quinteros, Haquin, Sagredo, Fernandez; Justiniano, R. Vaca (Bejarano 90+3); H. Vaca (Arrascaita 57), Terceros (Ramallo 46), Algaranaz (Villarroel 57); Martins (Reinoso 76).
Peru: Gallese – Corzo (Flores 81), Zambrano, Callens, Lopez (Pena 69); Quispe, Tapia, Yotun; Grimaldo (Advincula 69), Lapadula (Guerrero 56), Zanelatto (Reyna 57).

Nov 16 – Maturin
Venezuela 0
Ecuador 0
Venezuela: Romo – Gonzalez, Angel, Makoun (Ferraresi 84), Navarro; Casseres (Castillo 84), Jose Martinez (Rincon 84), Herrera (Otero 58); Sosa (Machis 71), Rondon, Soteldo.
Ecuador: Dominguez – Preciado, Torres, Pacho, Hincapie; Franco, M. Caicedo; Paez (Mena 70), Cifuentes (Ortiz 90+2), Sornoza (Julio 86); Rodriguez (Campana 71).

Nov 16 – Barranquilla
Colombia 2 (Diaz 75, 79)
Brazil 1 (Martinelli 4)
Colombia: Vargas – Munoz, Sanchez, Lucumi, Machado (Borja 46); Castano (Lerma 83), Carrascal (Rios 74); Uribe (Sinisterra 46), James, Diaz; Borre (Cordoba 68).
Brazil: Alisson – Emerson Royal, Marquinhos, Gabriel (Douglas Luiz 82), Renan Lodi (Pepe Aquino 81); Raphinha (Endrick 82), Bruno Guimaraes, Andre, Martinelli; Rodrygo (Paulinho 69), Vinicius Jr. (Joao Pedro 27).

Nov 16 – Buenos Aires
Argentina 0
Uruguay 2 (Araujo 41, Nunez 87)
Argentina: E. Martinez – Molina, Romero, Otamendi, Tagliafico (Acuna 80); De Paul (Palacios 64), Mac Allister (La. Martinez 46), Fernandez; Messi, Alvarez (Lo Celso 80), Gonzalez (Di Maria 53).
Uruguay: Rochet – R. Araujo, S. Caceres, M. Olivera, Vina (Gimenez 46); Ugarte, Valverde; Pellistri (Canobbio 88), De la Cruz, M. Araujo (Bentancur 62); Nunez (Vinas 90+1).

Nov 16 – Santiago
Chile 0
Paraguay 0
Chile: Cortes – Diaz (Loyola 78), Medel, Maripan, Suazo; Pulgar, Echeverria (Mendez 61); Davila (Guerrero 78), Sanchez, Brereton Diaz (Aravena 61); Pizarro.
Sent off: Mendez 88.
Paraguay: Coronel – R. Rojas, G. Gomez, Alderete, Espinoza; Villasanti (Caballero 63), Cubas; Sanabria (Caceres 45+1), M. Rojas (Galarza 85), D. Gomez (Sosa 62); Avalos (Campuzano 85).
Sent off: R. Rojas 44.

Nov 21 – Asuncion
Paraguay 0
Colombia 1 (Borre 11 pen)
Paraguay: Coronel – Caceres, G. Gomez, Alderete, Espinoza; M. Rojas (Caballero 46), Cubas (Cardozo 85), Villasanti (D. Gomez 66), Sosa; Sanabria (Leguizamon 46), Bareiro (Avalos 74).
Colombia: Vargas – Munoz, Mina, Lucumi, Borja (Mosquera 89); Lerma, Castano (Uribe 81); Arias, James (Carrascal 74), Diaz (Campaz 81); Borre (Cordoba 75).

Nov 21 – Montevideo
Uruguay 3 (Nunez 15, 71, Villamil 39 og)
Bolivia 0
Uruguay: Rochet – R. Araujo, Gimenez, S. Caceres, Vina; Valverde, Bentancur (Carballo 84), De la Cruz (De Arrascaeta 73); Pellistri (Torres 77), Nunez (Suarez 73), C. Olivera (Canobbio 87).
Bolivia: Viscarra – Quinteros (Bejarano 65), Haquin, Sagredo, Villarroel; Ramallo (Arrascaita 86), Villamil, Justiniano (Algaranaz 65), R. Vaca (Cuellar 90+3), Fernandez; Martins (Reinoso 87).

Nov 21 – Quito
Ecuador 1 (Mena 21)
Chile 0
Ecuador: Dominguez – Preciado, Torres, Arboleda, Pacho; Gruezo, M. Caicedo; Mena (Ortiz 75), Paez (Franco 82), Sornoza (Julio 57); Rodriguez (Campana 82).
Chile: Cortes – Loyola (Davila 55), Catalan, Diaz, Maripan, Suazo; Nunez (Osorio 79), Pulgar (Perez 70), Echeverria (Pizarro 79); Aravena (Brereton Diaz 55), Sanchez.

Nov 21 – Rio de Janeiro
Brazil 0
Argentina 1 (Otamendi 63)
Brazil: Alisson – Emerson Royal, Marquinhos (Nino 46), Gabriel (Joelinton 72), Carlos Augusto; Andre, Bruno Guimaraes (Douglas Luiz 78); Raphinha (Endrick 72), Rodrygo, Martinelli (Veiga 78); Gabriel Jesus.
Sent off: Joelinton 81.
Argentina: E. Martinez – Molina, Romero, Otamendi, Acuna (Tagliafico 66); Lo Celso (Gonzalez 70), Fernandez (Paredes 70), De Paul, Mac Allister; Messi (Di Maria 78), Alvarez (La. Martinez 78).

Nov 21 – Lima
Peru 1 (Yotun 17)
Venezuela 1 (Savarino 54)
Peru: Gallese – Corzo, Tapia, Callens, Lopez (Guerrero 84); Yotun, Quispe (Carrillo 65), Aquino (Cartagena 84); Grimaldo (Zanelatto 65), Lapadula, Reyna (Flores 55).
Venezuela: Romo – Gonzalez, Osorio, Angel, Navarro; Savarino (Casseres 77), Moreno (Castillo 85), Herrera (Sosa 90+4), Soteldo; Machis, Rondon (Ramirez 85).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Argentina	6	5	0	1	8	2	15
Uruguay	6	4	1	1	13	5	13
Colombia	6	3	3	0	6	3	12
Venezuela	6	2	3	1	6	3	9
Ecuador*	6	3	2	1	5	3	8
Brazil	6	2	1	3	8	7	7
Paraguay	6	1	2	3	1	3	5
Chile	6	1	2	3	3	7	5
Bolivia	6	1	0	5	4	14	3
Peru	6	0	2	4	1	9	2

**Deducted 3 points*

ASIA Section

● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Second Round

Group A

Nov 16 – Al Rayyan
Qatar 8 (Al Haydos 11, Almoez 15, 26, 33 pen, 45+3 pen, Meshaal 18, Alaaeldin 53 pen, Al Abdullah 90+4)
Afghanistan 1 (Sharifi 13)

Nov 16 – Kuwait City
Kuwait 0
India 1 (Manvir Singh 75)

Nov 21 – Dammam
Afghanistan 0
Kuwait 4 (Al Khaldi 18 pen, 80, Daham 69, Saleh 82)

Nov 21 – Bhubaneswar
India 0
Qatar 3 (Meshaal 4, Almoez 47, Abdurisag 86)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Qatar	2	2	0	0	11	1	6
Kuwait	2	1	0	1	4	1	3
India	2	1	0	1	1	3	3
Afghanistan	2	0	0	2	1	12	0

Group B

Nov 16 – Suita
Japan 5 (Ueda 11, 45+4, 50, Kamada 28, Doan 86)
Myanmar 0

Nov 16 – Jeddah
Syria 1 (Al Somah 37 pen)
North Korea 0

Nov 21 – Yangon
Myanmar 1 (Win Naing Tun 77)
North Korea 6 (Jong Il-gwan 30, 54, 56, Choe Ju-song 34 pen, Han Kwang-song 38, Ri Hyong-jin 70)

Nov 21 – Jeddah
Syria 0
Japan 5 (Kubo 32, Ueda 37, 40, Sugawara 47, Hosoya 82)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Japan	2	2	0	0	10	0	6
North Korea	2	1	0	1	6	2	3
Syria	2	1	0	1	1	5	3
Myanmar	2	0	0	2	1	11	0

Group C

Nov 16 – Seoul
South Korea 5 (Cho Gue-sung 44, Hwang Hee-chan 49, Son Heung-min 63, Hwang Ui-jo 68 pen, Lee Kang-in 85)
Singapore 0

Nov 16 – Bangkok
Thailand 1 (Sarach 23)
China 2 (Wu Lei 29, Wang Shangyuan 74)

Nov 21 – Singapore
Singapore 1 (Shawal 41)
Thailand 3 (Supachok 5, Suphanat 66, 87)

Nov 21 – Shenzen
China 0
South Korea 3 (Son Heung-min 11 pen, 45, Jung Seung-hyun 87)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
South Korea	2	2	0	0	8	0	6
Thailand	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
China	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
Singapore	2	0	0	2	1	8	0

Group D

Nov 16 – Muscat
Oman 3 (Al Malki 17, Pan Wen-chieh 41 og, Saleh 90+1)
Chinese Taipei 0

Nov 16 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 4 (Cool 7, 77, Brauzman 72 og, Faisal 90+3)
Kyrgyzstan 3 (Zhyrgalbek 42, Batyrkanov 44, Merk 57)

Nov 21 – Taipei
Chinese Taipei 0
Malaysia 1 (Lok 72)

Nov 21 – Bishkek
Kyrgyzstan 1 (Abdurakhmanov 49)
Oman 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Malaysia	2	2	0	0	5	3	6
Oman	2	1	0	1	3	1	3
Kyrgyzstan	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Chinese Taipei	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

Group E

Nov 16 – Tehran
Iran 4 (Azmoun 12, 15, Taremi 87, Rezaeian 90+2)
Hong Kong 0

Nov 16 – Ashgabat
Turkmenistan 1 (Durdyyev 44)
Uzbekistan 3 (Shukurov 57, 77, Shomurodov 90+1)

Nov 21 – Hong Kong
Hong Kong 2 (Wong Wai 12, Camargo 65)
Turkmenistan 2 (Mingazow 4, 36)

Nov 21 – Tashkent
Uzbekistan 2 (Urunov 52, Sergeev 83)
Iran 2 (Rezaeian 14, Taremi 38)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iran	2	1	1	0	6	2	4
Uzbekistan	2	1	1	0	5	3	4
Turkmenistan	2	0	1	1	3	5	1
Hong Kong	2	0	1	1	2	6	1

Group F

Nov 16 – Basra
Iraq 5 (Resan 20, Amat 35 og, Rashid 60, Amyn 81, Al Hamadi 88)
Indonesia 1 (Pattynama 45+3)

Nov 16 – Manila
Philippines 0
Vietnam 2 (Nguyen Van Toan 16, Nguyen Dinh Bac 90+4)

Nov 21 – Manila
Philippines 1 (Reichelt 23)
Indonesia 1 (Saddil 70)

Nov 21 – Hanoi
Vietnam 0
Iraq 1 (Mimi 90+7)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iraq	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Vietnam	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Philippines	2	0	1	1	1	3	1
Indonesia	2	0	1	1	2	6	1

Group G

Nov 16 – Al Ahsa
Saudi Arabia 4 (Al Shehri 6, 48 pen, Ghareeb 90+1, Radif 90+6)
Pakistan 0

Nov 16 – Dushanbe
Tajikistan 1 (Samiev 89)
Jordan 1 (Al Naimat 90+3)

Nov 21 – Islamabad
Pakistan 1 (Nabi 21)
Tajikistan 6 (Kamolov 9, 66, Soirov 13, Umarbayev 26, Panjshanbe 45, Samiev 90+1)

Nov 21 – Amman
Jordan 0
Saudi Arabia 2 (Al Shehri 8, 30)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saudi Arabia	2	2	0	0	6	0	6
Tajikistan	2	1	1	0	7	2	4
Jordan	2	0	1	1	1	3	1
Pakistan	2	0	0	2	1	10	0

Group H

Nov 16 – Dubai
United Arab Emirates 4 (Al Hammadi 11, Mabkhout 36 pen, 44, Lima 45+1)
Nepal 0

Nov 16 – Abha
Yemen 0
Bahrain 2 (Marhoon 38, Al Zubaidi 48 og)

Nov 21 – Kathmandu
Nepal 0
Yemen 2 (O. Al Dahi 72, M. Al Dahi 90)

Nov 21 – Riffa
Bahrain 0
United Arab Emirates 2 (Ramadan 36, Mabkhout 90 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
UAE	2	2	0	0	6	0	6
Bahrain	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Yemen	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Nepal	2	0	0	2	0	6	0

Group I

Nov 16 – Melbourne
Australia 7 (Souttar 4, Borrello 20, Duke 37, 40, Maclaren 48, 70, 84)
Bangladesh 0

Nov 16 – Sharjah
Lebanon 0
Palestine 0

Nov 21 – Dhaka
Bangladesh 1 (Morsalin 72)
Lebanon 1 (Osman 67)

Nov 21 – Kuwait City
Palestine 0
Australia 1 (Souttar 16)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Australia	2	2	0	0	8	0	6
Lebanon	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Palestine	2	0	1	1	0	1	1
Bangladesh	2	0	1	1	1	8	1

AFRICA Section

● *9 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

First Round

Group A

Nov 15 – El Jadida
Ethiopia 0
Sierra Leone 0

Nov 16 – Cairo
Egypt 6 (Salah 17, 22 pen, 48, 69, Mohamed 73, Trezeguet 89)
Djibouti 0

Nov 17 – Marrakesh
Burkina Faso 1 (Traore 61)
Guinea-Bissau 1 (Balde 20)

Nov 19 – Paynesville
Sierra Leone 0
Egypt 2 (Trezeguet 18, 62)

Nov 20 – Cairo
Djibouti 0
Guinea-Bissau 1 (Rodrigues 39)

Nov 21 – ElJadida
Ethiopia 0
Burkina Faso 3 (Toure 39, Traore 78 pen, Ouattara 90)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt	2	2	0	0	8	0	6
Burkina Faso	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Guinea-Bissau	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Sierra Leone	2	0	1	1	0	2	1
Ethiopia	2	0	1	1	0	3	1
Djibouti	2	0	0	2	0	7	0

Group B

Nov 15 – Kinshasa
DR Congo 2 (Wissa 62, Bongonda 81)
Mauritania 0

Nov 16 – Benghazi
Sudan 1 (Eisa 17 pen)
Togo 1 (Denkey 43)

Nov 18 – Diamniadio
Senegal 4 (P. Sarr 1, Mane 5, 56 pen, L. Camara 45)
South Sudan 0

Nov 19 – Benghazi
Sudan 1 (Pickel 79 og)
DR Congo 0

Nov 21 – Diamniadio
South Sudan 0
Mauritania 0

Nov 21 – Lome
Togo 0
Senegal 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Senegal	2	1	1	0	4	0	4
Sudan	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
DR Congo	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Togo	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Mauritania	2	0	1	1	0	2	1
South Sudan	2	0	1	1	0	4	1

Group C

Nov 15 – Butare
Rwanda 0
Zimbabwe 0

Nov 16 – Uyo
Nigeria 1 (Ajayi 67)
Lesotho 1 (Mkwanazi 56)

Nov 18 – Durban
South Africa 2 (Tau 2, Mudau 45+2)
Benin 1 (Mounie 70)

Nov 19 – Butare
Zimbabwe 1 (Musona 26)
Nigeria 1 (Iheanacho 67)

Nov 21 – Durban
Lesotho 0
Benin 0

Nov 21 – Butare
Rwanda 2 (Nshuti 12, Mugisha 28)
South Africa 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rwanda	2	1	1	0	2	0	4
South Africa	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Nigeria	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Lesotho	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Zimbabwe	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Benin	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

Group D

Nov 16 – Praia
Cape Verde 0
Angola 0

Nov 17 – Douala
Cameroon 3 (Mbeumo 45+2, Nkoudou 87, Magri 90+2)
Mauritius 0

Nov 17 – Mbombela
Eswatini 0
Libya 1 (Ekrawa 53)

Nov 21 – Saint Pierre
Mauritius 0
Angola 0

Nov 21 – Benina
Libya 1 (Aleiyan 43)
Cameroon 1 (Ntcham 34 pen)

Nov 21 – Mbombela
Eswatini 0
Cape Verde 2 (Mendes 17, Monteiro 38)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cameroon	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Cape Verde	2	1	1	0	2	0	4
Libya	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Angola	2	0	2	0	0	0	2
Mauritius	2	0	1	1	0	3	1
Eswatini	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Group E

Nov 17 – Ndola
Zambia 4 (Daka 5, 90+2, Banda 43, Sakala 69)
Congo 2 (Ganvoula 13, Bassouamina 15)

Nov 18 – Marrakesh
Niger 0
Tanzania 1 (M'Mombwa 56)

Nov 21 – Dar es Salaam
Tanzania 0
Morocco 2 (Ziyech 28, Mwamnyeto 54 og)

Nov 21 – Marrakesh
Niger 2 (Moutari 6, Goumey 28)
Zambia 1 (Daka 50)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco	1	1	0	0	2	0	3
Zambia	2	1	0	1	5	4	3
Niger	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Tanzania	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Congo	1	0	0	1	2	4	0
Eritrea*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Withdrew

Group F

Nov 16 – Dar es Salaam
Burundi 3 (Bigirimana 31, Nsabiyumva 35, Abdallah 75)
Gambia 2 (Barrow 45+4, E. Colley 90+8 pen)

Nov 16 – Franceville
Gabon 2 (Bouanga 60, Kanga 88)
Kenya 1 (Juma 40)

Nov 17 – Ebimpe
Ivory Coast 9 (Haller 20 pen, Sangare 24, Adingra 36, Konate 40 pen, 90+5, Fofana 60, Traore 77, 90+4, Krasso 84 pen)
Seychelles 0

Nov 19 – Dar es Salaam
Burundi 1 (Bigirimana 87)
Gabon 2 (Allevinah 35, Bouanga 83)

Nov 20 – Abidjan
Seychelles 0
Kenya 5 (Olunga 3, 6, Juma 45+3, Onyango 62, Omala 73)

Nov 20 – Dar es Salaam
Gambia 0
Ivory Coast 2 (Kouame 45, S. Fofana 85)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ivory Coast	2	2	0	0	11	0	6
Gabon	2	2	0	0	4	2	6
Kenya	2	1	0	1	6	2	3
Burundi	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Gambia	2	0	0	2	2	5	0
Seychelles	2	0	0	2	0	14	0

Group G

Nov 16 – Algiers
Algeria 3 (Abdi 2 og, Bounedjah 31, Slimani 80)
Somalia 1 (Ahmed 65)

Nov 16 – Francistown
Botswana 2 (Tlhalefang 74, Ngele 85)
Mozambique 3 (Clesio 14, Ratifo 52, Muiomo 75)

Nov 17 – Berkane
Guinea 2 (Camara 10, Cisse 90+5)
Uganda 1 (Bayo 30)

Nov 19 – Maputo
Mozambique 0
Algeria 2 (Chaibi 69, Zerrouki 80)

Nov 21 – Berkane
Somalia 0
Uganda 1 (Mato 4)

Nov 21 – Francistown
Botswana 1 (Seakanyeng 79)
Guinea 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Botswana	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Guinea	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Uganda	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Mozambique	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
Somalia	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group H

Nov 15 – Malabo
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Nsue 67)
Namibia 0

Nov 17 – Rades
Tunisia 4 (Meriah 37, Msakni 53, Rafia 79, Firas 88)
Sao Tome & Principe 0

Nov 17 – Paynesville
Liberia 0
Malawi 1 (Mphasi 78)

Nov 20 – Paynesville
Liberia 0
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Nsue 9)

Nov 21 – Agadir
Sao Tome & Principe 0
Namibia 2 (Tjiueza 9, Mateus 75 og)

Nov 21 – Lilongwe
Malawi 0
Tunisia 1 (Msakni 87 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tunisia	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
Equatorial Guinea	2	2	0	0	2	0	6
Namibia	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Malawi	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Liberia	2	0	0	2	0	2	0
Sao Tome & Principe	2	0	0	2	0	6	0

Group I

Nov 17 – Kumasi
Ghana 1 (Williams 90+6)
Madagascar 0

Nov 17 – Bamako
Mali 3 (Doumbia 45, Niakate 77, Sissoko 81)
Chad 1 (Mouandilmadji 53)

Nov 17 – Moroni
Comoros 4 (M'Dahoma 29, Youssouf 50, Said 58, Maolida 67)
Central African Republic 2 (Abdallah 10 og, Zahary 74 og)

Nov 20 – Oujda
Chad 0
Madagascar 3 (Rakotoharimalala 10, 84, Lapoussin 90+1)

Nov 20 – Bamako
Mali 1 (Doumbia 76)
Central African Republic 1 (Kondogbia 79)

Nov 21 – Moroni
Comoros 1 (Maolida 43)
Ghana 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Comoros	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
Mali	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Madagascar	2	1	0	1	3	1	3
Ghana	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Central African Rep	2	0	1	1	3	5	1
Chad	2	0	0	2	1	6	0

EURO 2024 QUALIFIERS

Group A

Nov 16 – Tbilisi
Georgia 2 (Kvaratskhelia 15, 57)
Scotland 2 (McTominay 49, Shankland 90+2)
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Kakabadze, Kvirkvelia, Kashia, Lochoshvili (Kalandadze 78), Shengelia (Azarovi 72); Chakvetadze (Davitashvili 79), Kvekveskiri (Mekvabishvili 70), Kochorashvili; Mikautadze (Zivzivadze 69), Kvaratskhelia.
Scotland: Clark – Patterson (Ralston 79), Porteous, McKenna, Taylor (Armstrong 79); McTominay, Gilmour (McLean 46), McGregor; McGinn, Dykes (Shankland 86), Christie (Ferguson 46).

Nov 16 – Limassol
Cyprus 1 (Pileas 75)
Spain 3 (Yamal 5, Oyarzabal 22, Joselu 28)
Cyprus: Mall – Andreou, Karo (Kousoulos 66), Gogic, Laifis, Ioannou; Kyriakou (Charlampous 46), Kyprianou (Spoljaric 46), Kastanos, Anderson Correia (Pileas 46); Pittas (Kakoullis 60).
Spain: Raya – Navas (Carvajal 66), Le Normand (D. Garcia 46), P. Torres, Grimaldo; Gavi, Zubimendi, Moreno (A. Garcia 46); Yamal (F. Torres 73), Joselu, Oyarzabal (Riquelme 40).

Nov 19 – Glasgow
Scotland 3 (McGinn 13, Ostigard 33 og, Armstrong 59)
Norway 3 (Donnum 3, Strand Larsen 20, Elyounoussi 86)
Scotland: Clark – Patterson, Hendry, McKenna, Taylor; McTominay, McGregor (Shankland 89); Armstrong (Christie 70), McGinn (Jack 79), McLean (Ferguson 70); Brown (Dykes 70).
Norway: Selvik – Ryerson, Ajer, Ostigard, Bjorkan; Berge, Berg, Aursnes (Elyounoussi 61); Bobb (Pedersen 89), Strand Larsen, Donnum (Thorstvedt 60).

Nov 19 – Valladolid
Spain 3 (Le Normand 4, F. Torres 55, Lochoshvili 72 og)
Georgia 1 (Kvaratskhelia 10)
Spain: Simon – Carvajal, Le Normand, Martinez, Gaya; Gavi (Sancet 26), Rodri (Zubimendi 86), Fabian; F. Torres (Yamal 65), Morata, Williams (Riquelme 86).
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Kakabadze (Mamuchashvili 90), Kvirkvelia, Kashia, Lochoshvili, Azarovi (Gocholeishvili 78); Chakvetadze (Altunashvili 90), Kvekveskiri (Mekvabishvili 60), Kochorashvili; Mikautadze (Davitashvili 60), Kvaratskhelia.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Spain (Q)	8	7	0	1	25	5	21
Scotland (Q)	8	5	2	1	17	8	17
Norway	8	3	2	3	14	12	11
Georgia*	8	2	2	4	12	18	8
Cyprus	8	0	0	8	3	28	0

Advance to the play-offs via the Nations League

Group B

Nov 18 – Nice
France 14 (Santos 3 og, M. Thuram 4, Zaire-Emery 16, Mbappe 30 pen, 74, 82, Clauss 34, Coman 36, 65, Fofana 37, Rabiot 63, Dembele 73, Giroud 89, 90+1)
Gibraltar 0
France: Maignan – Clauss, Todibo, Upamecano (Saliba 81), T. Hernandez; Zaire-Emery (Fofana 20), Rabiot (Kamara 67); Coman (Dembele 66), Griezmann, Mbappe; M. Thuram (Giroud 67).
Gibraltar: Coleing – Sergeant, R. Chipolina, Santos, Mouelhi, J. Chipolina (Olivero 61); Walker (Jolley 62), Pozo, De Haro, Casciaro; De Barr (Coombes 81).
Sent off: Santos 18.

Nov 18 – Amsterdam
Netherlands 1 (Weghorst 11)
Republic of Ireland 0
Netherlands: Verbruggen – De Vrij, Van Dijk, Blind; Dumfries, Schouten (De Roon 90), Reijnders (Koopmeiners 90), Hartman; Simons (Malen 80), Gakpo (Veerman 69); Weghorst.
Republic of Ireland: Bazunu – O'Shea (Parrott 90), Collins, Scales; Doherty (Johnston 77), Browne, Cullen, Manning; Robinson (Idah 46), Knight (Molumby 78); Ferguson (McGrath 55).

Nov 21 – Algarve
Gibraltar 0
Netherlands 6 (Stengs 10, 50, 62, Wieffer 23, Koopmeiners 38, Gakpo 81)
Gibraltar: Coleing – Sergeant, Mouelhi, R. Chipolina, Olivero, J. Chipolina (Badr 66); Walker (El Hmidi 66), Pozo (Jolley 14), De Haro, Casciaro (Coombes 66); De Barr (Peacock 82).
Netherlands: Verbruggen – Teze, De Vrij, Van Dijk (Hato 46), Hartman (Simons 63); Wieffer, Veerman (Reijnders 46), Koopmeiners; Stengs, Weghorst (Dallinga 46), Malen (Gakpo 77).

Nov 21 – Athens
Greece 2 (Bakasetas 56, Ioannidis 61)
France 2 (Kolo Muani 42, Fofana 74)
Greece: Vlachodimos – Retsos, Mavropanos, Hatzidiakos; Rota (Saliakas 85), Bouchalakis, Galanopoulos (Alexandropoulos 67), Bakasetas (Konstantelias 86), Giannoulis; Masouras (Pavlidis 78), Ioannidis (Zeca 77).
France: Samba – Kounde (Clauss 64), Saliba, L. Hernandez (Disasi 85), T. Hernandez; Fofana, Rabiot; Dembele (Coman 64), Griezmann, Kolo Muani (Mbappe 64); Giroud (M. Thuram 70).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
France (Q)	8	7	1	0	29	3	22
Netherlands (Q)	8	6	0	2	17	7	18
Greece*	8	4	1	3	14	8	13
Rep of Ireland	8	2	0	6	9	10	6
Gibraltar	8	0	0	8	0	41	0

**Advance to the play-offs via the Nations League*

Group C

Nov 17 – Wembley
England 2 (Pepe 8 og, Kane 75)
Malta 0
England: Pickford – Trippier, Guehi, Maguire, Tomori (Saka 46); Alexander-Arnold, Henderson (Rice 61), Gallagher (Walker 46); Foden, Kane, Rashford (Palmer 61).
Malta: Bonello – J. Mbong (Attard 86), S. Borg, Pepe, J. Borg (Z. Muscat 79), Camenzuli; Yankam, Guillaumier (Kristensen 59), Teuma; P. Mbong (Jones 59), Reid (Nwoko 79).

Nov 17 – Rome
Italy 5 (Darmian 17, Chiesa 41, 45+2, Raspadori 81, El Shaarawy 90+3)
North Macedonia 2 (Atanasov 52, 74)
Italy: Donnarumma – Darmian, Gatti, Acerbi, Dimarco; Barrella, Jorginho (Cristante 62), Bonaventura (Frattesi 62); Berardi (El Shaarawy 76), Raspadori (Scamacca 90), Chiesa (Zaniolo 62).
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Manev (Ashkovski 46), Serafimov, Musliu; Dimoski, Ademi (Atanasov 46), Elezi (Alimi 64), Alioski; Miovski (M. Ristovski 46), Bardhi, Elmas (Churlinov 72).

Nov 20 – Skopje
North Macedonia 1 (Bardhi 41)
England 1 (Atanasov 59 og)
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Manev, Serafimov, Musliu; Dimoski (Ashkovski 86), Alimi (Kostadinov 75), Atanasov (Elezi 90+1), Alioski; Bardhi; Miovski (M. Ristovski 75), Elmas.
England: Pickford – Walker, Maguire, Guehi, Lewis; Alexander-Arnold (Phillips 84), Rice; Saka (Palmer 84), Foden, Grealish (Rashford 84); Watkins (Kane 58).

Nov 20 – Leverkusen
Ukraine 0
Italy 0
Ukraine: Trubin – Konoplya (Tymchyk 86), Zabarnyi, Svatok (Malinovskyi 90+1), Mykolenko; Stepanenko (Pikhalyonok 80); Tsygankov (Zubkov 80), Sudakov, Zinchenko (Sikan 86), Mudryk; Dovbyk.
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Acerbi, Buongiorno, Dimarco; Frattesi, Jorginho (Cristante 71), Barrella; Zaniolo (Politano 71, Darmian 90+2), Raspadori (Scamacca 46), Chiesa (Kean 80).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
England (Q)	8	6	2	0	22	4	20
Italy (Q)	8	4	2	2	16	9	14
Ukraine*	8	4	2	2	11	8	14
N. Macedonia	8	2	2	4	10	20	8
Malta	8	0	0	8	2	20	0

**Advance to the play-offs via the Nations League*

Group D

Nov 18 – Yerevan
Armenia 1 (Zelarayan 5)
Wales 1 (Tiknizyan 45+2 og)
Armenia: Cancarevic – Dashyan, Calisir, Haroyan, G. Harutyunyan, Tiknizyan; Bichakhchyan (Sevikyan 72), Iwu (H. Harutyunyan 63), Spertsyan, Zelarayan; Ranos (Miranyan 72).
Wales: Ward – Mepham, Rodon, B. Davies; Roberts (Broadhead 79), J. James, Ampadu, Williams; Brooks (Johnson 50), Wilson (D. James 66); Moore.

Nov 18 – Riga
Latvia 0
Croatia 2 (Majer 7, Kramaric 16)
Latvia: Ozols – Savalnieks, Cernomordijs, Balodis, Ciganiks; Tobers, Saveljevs; Jaunzems (Jurkovskis 89), J. Ikaunieks, Daskevics (Zelenkovs 89); Uldrikis (Krollis 83).
Croatia: Livakovic – Stanisic, Sutalo, Erlic, Gvardiol; Modric (Baturina 86), Brozovic; Majer, Kramaric (Marco Pasalic 80), Ivanusec (Mario Pasalic 61); Budimir.

Nov 21 – Zagreb
Croatia 1 (Budimir 43)
Armenia 0
Croatia: Livakovic – Stanisic (Juranovic 50), Sutalo, Gvardiol, Sosa; Modric, Brozovic; Majer (Sucic 84), Kramaric (Marco Pasalic 69), Ivanusec (Mario Pasalic 46); Budimir (Baturina 84).
Armenia: Cancarevic – Hovhannisyan (Piloyan 86), Calisir, G. Harutyunyan, Mkrtchyan, Tiknizyan; Sevikyan (Serboyan 70), Spertsyan, H. Harutyunyan (Dashyan 70), Zelarayan (Bichakhchyan 46); Ranos (Miranyan 73).

Nov 21 – Cardiff
Wales 1 (Williams 7)
Turkey 1 (Yazici 70 pen)
Wales: Ward – Rodon, Lockyer, B. Davies; Roberts, J. James, Ampadu, Williams (Moore 84); Wilson (D. James 80), Broadhead (Brooks 62); Johnson.
Turkey: Cakir (Bayindir 33) – Kadioglu, Akaydin, Bardakci, Ozkacar (Celik 46); Yuksek, Ozcan; Sari (Ayhan 79), Omur (Yazici 33), Akturkoglu; Yilmaz (Yildiz 59).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Turkey (Q)	8	5	2	1	14	7	17
Croatia (Q)	8	5	1	2	13	4	16
Wales*	8	3	3	2	10	10	12
Armenia	8	2	2	4	9	11	8
Latvia	8	1	0	7	5	19	3

**Advance to the play-offs via the Nations League*

Group E

Nov 17 – Chisinau
Moldova 1 (Baboglo 87)
Albania 1 (Cikalleshi 25 pen)
Moldova: Railean – Craciun, Baboglo, Posmac; Revenco (Cojocaru 46), Motpan (Damascan 68), Rata, Reabciuk; Caimacov (Cojocari 76), Posotolachi; Nicolaescu (Stina 76).
Albania: Berisha – Hysaj, Ismajli, Djimsiti, Mitaj; Asllani, Ramadani; Asani (Muja 90+2), Bajrami (Gjasula 80), Seferi; Cikalleshi (Daku 62).

Nov 17 – Warsaw
Poland 1 (Piotrowski 38)
Czech Republic 1 (Soucek 49)
Poland: Szczesny – Bednarek, Bochniewicz (Peda 58, S. Szymanski 85), Kiwior; Frankowski, D. Szymanski (Grosicki 73), Piotrowski, Slisz, Zalewski; Lewandowski, Swiderski (Buksa 46).
Czech Republic: Stanek – Zima, Brabec, Holes; Coufal, Sadilek (Kral 90+1), Soucek, Doudera; Provod (Lingr 75); Chytil (Cvancara 46), Kuchta (Hlozek 46).

Nov 20 – Tirana
Albania 0
Faroe Islands 0
Albania: Strakosha – Balliu, Ismajli, Djimsiti, Mitaj; Bare (Laci 61), Asllani, Bajrami; Asani (Muci 74), Daku (Cikalleshi 74), Uzuni (Mucolli 61).
Faroe Islands: Lamhauge (Reynatrod 34) – Danielsen, Faero, Edmundsson, Davidsen; G. Vatnhamar; Bjartalid, Andreasen, Joensen, Hendriksson (S. Vatnhamar 63); Simun Edmundsson (Petersen 86)

Nov 20 – Olomouc
Czech Republic 3 (Doudera 14, Chory 72, Soucek 90)
Moldova 0
Czech Republic: Stanek – Vitik, Zima, Holes; Masopust, Soucek, Sadilek (Kral 58), Doudera; Provod (Lingr 77); Chory (Chytil 86), Hlozek (Kusej 58).
Moldova: Railean – Revenco (Cojocaru 46), Craciun, Baboglo, Posmac, Reabciuk; Posotolachi, Rata (Stina 78), Caimacov (Platica 59), Motpan (Damascan 46); Nicolaescu (Cojocari 65).
Sent off: Baboglo 55.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Albania (Q)	8	4	3	1	12	4	15
Czech Rep (Q)	8	4	3	1	12	6	15
Poland*	8	3	2	3	10	10	11
Moldova	8	2	4	2	7	10	10
Faroe Islands	8	0	2	6	2	13	2

**Advance to the play-offs via the Nations League*

Group F

Nov 16 – Baku
Azerbaijan 3 (Mahmudov 3, 89, Dadashov 6)
Sweden 0
Azerbaijan: Magomedaliyev – Mammadov, Mustafazade, Krivotsyuk, Cafarguliyev; Bayramov (Emreli 81), Isayev (Aliyev 75), Diniyev (Camalov 81), Seydayev (Isfarilov 75); Mahmudov; Dadashov (Haghverdi 66).
Sent off: Mustafazade 57.
Sweden: Olsen – Wahlqvist (Krafth 60), Lindelof, Helander, Sema; Svanberg, Cajuste (Quaison 75), Gustafson (Claesson 60), Forsberg; Kulusevski, Gyokeres.

Nov 16 – Tallinn
Estonia 0
Austria 2 (Laimer 25, Lienhart 39)
Estonia: Hein – Miller (Pikk 71), J. Tamm, Paskotsi, Mets, Sinyavskiy; Tunjov (Shein 60), Vetkal, Poom (Peetson 83); Anier (Jurgens 60), Vastsuk (Zenjov 71).
Austria: A. Schlager – Posch, Lienhart, Alaba, Wober; Baumgartner (Schmid 63), Seiwald, X. Schlager (Seidl 76); Laimer (Arnautovic 46), Gregoritsch (Kalajdzic 63), Sabitzer (Kainz 89).

Nov 19 – Brussels
Belgium 5 (Lukaku 17, 26, 30, 37, Trossard 90)
Azerbaijan 0
Belgium: Casteels – Faes, Vertonghen (Al Dakhil 84), Theate (Saelemaekers 60); Castagne, Mangala, Vranckx (Tielemans 46), Doku; Bakayoko (Carrasco 60), Trossard; Lukaku (Openda 46).
Azerbaijan: Magomedaliyev – Haghverdi, Mammadov, Krivotsyuk, Cafarguliyev (Aliyev 46); Isfarilov; Emreli (Akhundzade 46), Mahmudov (Camalov 77), Isayev (Diniyev 46), Bayramov; Dadashov (Akhmedzade 64).
Sent off: Isfarilov 24.

Nov 19 – Solna
Sweden 2 (Claesson 22, Forsberg 55)
Estonia 0
Sweden: Olsen – Krafth, Lindelof, Helander, Augustinsson; Kulusevski, Cajuste (Olsson 85), A. Ekdal (Larsson 72), Forsberg (Svanberg 72); Gyokeres, Claesson (Quaison 85).
Estonia: Hein – Tamm (Kuusk 72), Paskotsi, Mets; Peetson, Kait, Poom, Pikk (A. Tamm 84); Vastsuk (Sinyavskiy 56), Tunjov (Zenjov 56); Jurgens (Anier 62).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Belgium (Q)	8	6	2	0	22	4	20
Austria (Q)	8	6	1	1	17	7	19
Sweden	8	3	1	4	14	12	10
Azerbaijan	8	2	1	5	7	17	7
Estonia*	8	0	1	7	2	22	1

**Advance to the play-offs via the Nations League*

Group G

Nov 16 – Sofia
Bulgaria 2 (Delev 24, Despodov 78 pen)
Hungary 2 (Adam 10, Petkov 90+7 og)
Bulgaria: Naumov – Popov, Petkov, Antov, Nedyalkov; Chochev (Atanasov 43), Krastev, Gruev; Despodov (Rusev 83), Delev (Ivanov 83), Minchev (Kolev 72).
Sent off: Antov 36.
Hungary: Dibusz – Botka (Gazdag 81), Lang, A. Szalai; Nego (Kalmar 81), A. Nagy, Styles, Kerkez; Szoboszlai; Adam (Nemeth 74), Csoboth (Z. Nagy 59).
Sent off: Kerkez 57.

Nov 16 – Podgorica
Montenegro 2 (Kuc 3, Jovetic 48)
Lithuania 0
Montenegro: Mijatovic – Vesovic, Rubezic, Vujacic, Radunovic; Osmajic, Jankovic (Loncar 79), Kuc, Camaj (Dukanovic 75); Krstovic (Bakic 79), Jovetic (M. Vukcevic 69).
Lithuania: Gertmonas – Lasickas, Utkus (Dolznikov 63), Girdvainis, Lekiatas, Sirvys (Upstas 63); Slivka, Vorobjovas (Novikovas 63), Gineitis, Cernych (Romanovskij 81); Paulauskas.

Nov 19 – Budapest
Hungary 3 (Szoboszlai 66, 68, A. Nagy 90+3)
Montenegro 1 (Rubezic 36)
Hungary: Dibusz – Balogh, Lang, A. Szalai; Bolla (Nego 46), A. Nagy (Szuhodovszki 90+4), Styles (Horvath 64), Z. Nagy; Gazdag (Kalmar 46), Szoboszlai; Adam (Nemeth 78).
Montenegro: Mijatovic (Dukic 58) – Rubezic (Raickovic 76), Savic, Vujacic; Vesovic (M. Vukcevic 55), Jankovic (Radulovic 70), Kuc, Camaj (Krstovic 70), A. Vukcevic; Osmajic, Jovetic.

Nov 19 – Leskovac
Serbia 2 (Veljkovic 16, Babic 82)
Bulgaria 2 (Rusev 59, Despodov 69)
Serbia: N. Milinkovic-Savic – Milenkovic, Veljkovic, Babic; Zivkovic (Radonjic 76), Gudelj, Lukic (Ilic 76), Kostic; Tadic (Maksimovic 85), Djuricic (Vlahovic 62); A. Mitrovic (Mladenovic 85).
Bulgaria: Naumov – Turitsov, Petkov, Atanasov, Popov; Gruev; Minchev (Rusev 46), Krastev (Borukov 77), Kraev (Chochev 77), Despodov (Kovachev 90); Kolev (Iliev 77).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hungary (Q)	8	5	3	0	16	7	18
Serbia (Q)	8	4	2	2	15	9	14
Montenegro	8	3	2	3	9	11	11
Lithuania	8	1	3	4	8	14	6
Bulgaria	8	0	4	4	7	14	4

Group H

Nov 17 – Astana
Kazakhstan 3 (Chesnokov 19, 51, Aymbetov 90+2 pen)
San Marino 1 (Franciosi 60)
Kazakhstan: Shatskiy – Kairov (Skvortsov 54), Maliy, Marochkin, Bystrov (Erlanov 54), Dosmagambetov (Vorogovskiy 62); Chesnokov, Beisebekov, Zuev (Tapalov 64), Orazov (Kenesov 55); Aymbetov.
San Marino: E. Benedettini – Ma. Battistini, Fabbri, Di Maio (Franciosi 46), Rossi, Tosi; A. Golinucci, Capicchioni (E. Golinucci 90+4), Mularoni (Lunadei 90+5), Lazzari (Pancotti 77); Nanni (Vitaioli 27).

Nov 17 – Helsinki
Finland 4 (Pohjanpalo 42 pen, Hakans 48, Pukki 74, Lod 88)
Northern Ireland 0
Finland: Hradecky – Alho (Pallas 83), Tenho, Ivanov, Peltola; Kairinen, Schuller (Lod 72), Kamara; F. Jensen (Pukki 60), Pohjanpalo (Lingman 83), Hakans (Taylor 72).
Northern Ireland: Hazard – Toal, Ballard, McNair; Hume (Forbes 85), Saville, Thompson (Spencer 77), Lewis; McCausland (Washington 59), Price (Marshall 85); D. Charles (Magennis 60).

Nov 17 – Copenhagen
Denmark 2 (Maehle 26, Delaney 54)
Slovenia 1 (Janza 30)
Denmark: Schmeichel – Maehle, Andersen, Christensen, Vestergaard, Kristiansen (Kristensen 86); Hojbjerg, Norgaard (Jensen 46), Delaney (Hjulmand 75); Poulsen (Lindstrom 90+1), Wind (Dolberg 86).
Slovenia: Oblak – Karnicnik, Blazic, Bijol, Janza (Drkusic 62); Verbic (Lovric 73), Cerin, Elsnik (Kurtic 62), Mlakar (Zajc 86); Vipotnik, Sesko (Gorenc Stankovic 73).

Nov 20 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 2 (Price 60, D. Charles 81)
Denmark 0
Northern Ireland: Hazard – Hume, Toal, McNair, Brown, Lewis; Price (Smyth 78),

S. Charles, Saville (Thompson 82), Taylor (McMenamin 78); D. Charles (Washington 87).
Denmark: Schmeichel – Kristensen, Andersen, Christensen, Kristiansen; O'Riley (Hojbjerg 61), Hjulmand (Wind 73), Jensen (Delaney 61); Lindstrom (Poulsen 56), Dolberg, Daramy (Vestergaard 61).

Nov 20 – Serraville
San Marino 1 (Berardi 90+7 pen)
Finland 2 (Soiri 50, 58)
San Marino: Simoncini –D'Addario, Franciosi, Rossi (Ma. Battistini 78), Palazzi, Tosi; A. Golinucci, Capicchioni, Mularoni (Zafferani 78); Lazzari, Vitaioli (Berardi 62).
Finland: Sinisalo –Soiri (Uronen 71), Hoskonen, R. Jensen, Galvez; Kamara (Kairinen 70), Lingman, Taylor; Lod (Pohjanpalo 46), Pukki (F. Jensen 79), Hakans (Kallman 71).

Nov 20 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 2 (Sesko 41 pen, Verbic 86)
Kazakhstan 1 (Orazov 48)
Slovenia: Oblak – Karnicnik, Blazic, Bijol, Janza (Drkusic 87); Stojanovic (Gorenc Stankovic 90+2), Cerin, Elsnik, Mlakar (Verbic 72); Sporar (Kurtic 87), Sesko.
Kazakhstan: Shatskiy – Bystrov, Maliy, Marochkin, Alip, Vorogovskiy; Chesnokov (Sviridov 81), Beisebekov (Tapalov 82), Kuat (Kenesov 64), Orazov; Samorodov (Aymbetov 90+2).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Denmark (Q)	10	7	1	2	19	10	22
Slovenia (Q)	10	7	1	2	20	9	22
Finland*	10	6	0	4	18	10	18
Kazakhstan*	10	6	0	4	16	12	18
N. Ireland	10	3	0	7	9	13	9
San Marino	10	0	0	10	3	31	0

**Advance to the play-offs via the Nations League*

Group I

Nov 12 – Pristina
Kosovo 1 (Rashica 41)
Israel 0
Kosovo: Muric – Dellova, Aliti, I. Krasniqi; Kastrati (E. Krasniqi 46), Loshaj (Bytyqi 46), Zyba, Muslija (Rashani 62), Berisha; Rashica (Hajrizi 78); Muriqi (Korenica 66).
Israel: O. Glazer – Dasa (Giorno 72), Vitor, Goldberg, Revivo; Dor Peretz (Safouri 72), Lavi (Abu Fani 62), Kinda (Turgeman 46); Yehezkel (Kanichowsky 22), Zahavi, Gloukh.
Sent off: Revivo 90+4.

Nov 15 – Felcsut
Israel 1 (Weissman 88)
Switzerland 1 (Vargas 36)
Israel: O. Glazer – Dasa (Zahavi 65), Shlomo, Goldberg, Davidzada; Lavi (D. Glazer 65), Abu Fani; Khalaili (Weissman 81), Safouri (Kanichowsky 46), Giorno (Gloukh 65); Turgeman.
Switzerland: Sommer – Fernandez, Akanji, Zesiger, Rodriguez; Freuler, Zakaria, Xhaka; Amdouni (Ndoye 69), Okafor (Zeqiri 68, Comert 90+5), Vargas (Steffen 77).
Sent off: Fernandes 90+4.

Nov 18 – Budapest
Belarus 1 (Laptev 83)
Andorra 0
Belarus: Ignatovich – Karpovich (Bakhar 63), Pavlovets, Parkhomenko, Volkov, Pechenin (Laptev 74); Klimovich (Kontsevoy 46), Kaplenko (Gromyko 63), Ebong; Antilevskiy, Morozov (Skavysh 63).
Andorra: Alvarez – De Pablos (J. Rubio 90), Llovera, M. Vales, Pomares (Remolins 87), Cervos; Alaez, Rebes (E. Vales 66), Vieira (Pujol 87), Martinez; Cucu (Sanchez 66).

Nov 18 – Felcsut
Israel 1 (Zahavi 2)
Romania 2 (Puscas 10, Hagi 63)
Israel: O. Glazer – Dasa (Kanichowsky 62), Vitor, Goldberg, Revivo (Baribo 76); Dor Peretz, Lavi (Abu Fani 62); Khalaili (Giorno 76), Gloukh, Turgeman; Zahavi.
Romania: Moldovan – Ratiu, Dragusin, Burca, Bancu; R. Marin (Cicaldau 87), Screciu (M. Marin 77); Hagi (Coman 65), Stanciu (Rus 87), Dragus (Mihaila 65); Puscas.
Sent off: Mihaila 84.

Nov 18 – Basel
Switzerland 1 (Vargas 47)
Kosovo 1 (Hyseni 82)
Switzerland: Sommer – Comert (Ugrinic 84), Akanji, Elvedi, Garcia; Zakaria, Xhaka, Freuler (Aebischer 66); Shaqiri (Steffen 84), Okafor (Ndoye 75), Vargas (Amdouni 75).
Kosovo: Bekaj – Dellova, Aliti, I. Krasniqi; Hadergjonaj (Hyseni 73), Zyba (Hajrizi 78), Vojvoda, Berisha (Korenica 66); Bytyqi (Kastrati 46), Muslija; Rashani (Zeqiri 46).

Nov 21 – Andorra la Vella
Andorra 0
Israel 2 (Cervos 29 og, Kinda 81)
Andorra: Alvarez – San Nicolas, Llovera, M. Vales, Olivera, Cervos; Alaez (Martinez 74), Vieira (Rebes 87), E. Vales (Pujol 87), Fernandez (M. Garcia 57); Cucu (Sanchez 57).
Israel: D. Peretz – Cohen, Lemkin (Arad 46), Schmolo, Davidzada; Kanichowsky, Dor Peretz (D. Glazer 61), Kinda (Safouri 89); Khalaili (Giorno 46), Baribo (Weissman 74), David.

Nov 21 – Pristina
Kosovo 0
Belarus 1 (Antilevsky 43)
Kosovo: Bekaj – Dellova, Aliti, I. Krasniqi; Hadergjonaj (Ajdini 83), Zyba (Korenica 56), Vojvoda, Berisha (Kastrati 67); Bytyqi (Hyseni 46), Muslija; Rashani (Zeqiri 56).
Belarus: Pavlyuchenko – Yuzepchuk (Karpovich 90+1), Volkov, Politevich, Polyakov, Malkevich; Korzun, Kaplenko (Bocherov 57), Ebong (Kontsevoy 73); Antilevskiy (Klimovich 74), Skavysh (Laptev 56).

Nov 21 – Bucharest
Romania 1 (Alibec 50)
Switzerland 0
Romania: Moldovan – Ratiu, Dragusin, Burca, Bancu; M. Marin; Morutan (Hagi 65), Cicaldau (R. Marin 64), Stanciu (Olaru 83), Coman (Dragus 79); Alibec (Puscas 83).
Switzerland: Mvogo – Akanji, Elvedi, Rodriguez; Ndoye, Aebischer (Freuler 84), Xhaka, Garcia (Ugrinic 62); Shaqiri (Steffen 62), Vargas (Zeqiri 81); Okafor (Amdouni 62).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Romania (Q)	10	6	4	0	16	5	22
Switzerland (Q)	10	4	5	1	22	11	17
Israel*	10	4	3	3	11	11	15
Belarus	10	3	3	4	9	14	12
Kosovo	10	2	5	3	10	10	11
Andorra	10	0	2	8	3	20	2

**Advance to the play-offs via the Nations League*

Group J

Nov 17 – Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0
Portugal 2 (Ronaldo 46, Cancelo 57)
Liechtenstein: B. Buchel – Malin, Wieser, Traber; Beck (Kranz 64), Luchinger (Meier 46), M. Buchel, Sele (Hofer 77), Goppel; Salanovic (Martin Marxer 90+1), Hasler (Ospelt 64).
Portugal: Sa – A. Silva, R. Neves, Toti; Fernandes (Vitinha 67); Cancelo (Mario 87), B. Silva (Horta 60), Felix (J. Neves 87), Jota; Ronaldo (Bruma 67), Ramos.

Nov 17 – Luxembourg City
Luxembourg 4 (Olesen 6, G. Rodrigues 30 pen, 90+5, Mujakic 55 og)
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Gojkovic 90+3)
Luxembourg: Moris – M. Martins, Mahmutovic (Korac 84), Chanot (Gerson 64), Carlson; Sinani, Olesen (Muratovic 75), C. Martins (O. Thill 84), Barreiro, Bohnert (S. Thill 75); G. Rodrigues.
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Vasilj – Dedic, Gojkovic, Kovacevic, Mujakic; Hadziahmetovic (Hajradinovic 46), Cimirot; Stevanovic (Demirovic 46), Krunic, Hamulic (Gazibegovic 79); Tabakovic (Prevljak 80).

Nov 17 – Bratislava
Slovakia 4 (Kucka 30, Duda 36 pen, Haraslin 47, 55)
Iceland 2 (Oskarsson 17, Gudjohnsen 74)
Slovakia: Dubravka – Gyomber, Vavro, Skriniar, Hancko; Kucka, Lobotka, Duda (Benes 79); Schranz (Duris 79), Bozenik (Polievka 79), Haraslin (Suslov 65).
Iceland: Olafsson – Sampsted, Palsson, Ingason, Finnsson; Hlynsson (Bergmann Johannesson 46), Gudmundsson, Traustason (Thordharson 25); Willumsson (Finnbogason 73), Oskarsson (Gudjohnsen 73), A. Sigurdsson (Gunnarsson 61).

Nov 19 – Zenica
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Hrosovsky 49 og)
Slovakia 2 (Bozenik 52, Satka 71)
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Piric – Gazibegovic, Gojkovic, Hadzikadunic, Mujakic; Cimirot (Zolotic 78), Basic; Hamulic (Varesanovic 87), Hajradinovic (Ziljkic 87), Demirovic; Prevljak (Bilbija 59).
Sent off: Gojkovic 63.
Slovakia: Rodak – Pekarik, Satka, Skriniar, Hancko; Duda (Kadak 85), Hrosovsky, Benes (Kucka 66); Suslov (Jirka 85), Bozenik (Polievka 76), Mak (Tupta 75).

Nov 19 – Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0
Luxembourg 1 (G. Rodrigues 69)
Liechtenstein: B. Buchel – S. Wolfinger (Beck 63), Malin, Wieser, Traber (Schlegel 75), Hofer (Kranz 63); Meier (Netzer 75), M. Buchel, Goppel; Salanovic, Hasler (Ospelt 9).
Luxembourg: Moris – Jans (M. Martins 90), Korac (Mahmutovic 57), Chanot, Carlson; S. Thill (Bohnert 57), Barreiro, Olesen, V. Thill (Muratovic 75); Sinani, Rodrigues.
Sent off: Sinani 5.

Nov 19 – Lisbon
Portugal 2 (Fernandes 37, Horta 66)
Iceland 0
Portugal: Costa – Mario (Guerreiro 63), Dias, Inacio, Cancelo (J. Neves 87); Palhinha; B. Silva (Horta 62), Fernandes, Otavio (Vitinha 75), Felix (Bruma 87); Ronaldo.
Iceland: Valdimarsson – Palsson, Ingason, Hermannsson, Thorarinsson; Thorsteinsson (Gudjohnsen 62), Bergmann Johannesson (Traustason 62), Gudmundsson, A. Sigurdsson; Willumsson (Ellertsson 62), Finnbogason (Oskarsson 46).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Portugal (Q)	10	10	0	0	36	2	30
Slovakia (Q)	10	7	1	2	17	8	22
Luxembourg*	10	5	2	3	13	19	17
Iceland*	10	3	1	6	17	16	10
Bosnia-Herz*	10	3	0	7	9	20	9
Liechtenstein	10	0	0	10	1	28	0

**Advance to the play-offs via the Nations League*

Play-Offs Draw

Path A

Mar 21: Wales v Finland; Poland v Estonia
Winners will meet in the final on March 26

Path B

Mar 21: Bosnia & Herzegovina v Ukraine; Israel v Iceland
Winners will meet in the final on March 26

Path C

Mar 21: Georgia v Luxembourg; Greece v Kazakhstan
Winners will meet in the final on March 26

2023-24 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

League A

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Nov 16 – San Jose
Costa Rica 0
Panama 3 (Murillo 4, Fajardo 29, Waterman 60)
Costa Rica: Chamorro – Arboine (Oviedo 46), Gonzalez, J. Vargas, Valverde; Campbell (K. Vargas 75), Aguilera, Tejeda (Bran 59), Marin (Bennette 60); Ugalde, Contreras (Zamora 75).
Panama: O. Mosquera – Escobar, Cordoba, Andrade (Ramos 76); Murillo, Godoy (Martinez 68), Carrasquilla, Barcenas; Fajardo (Waterman 46), Rodriguez (Blackman 67); Diaz (Quintero 76).

Nov 16 – Austin
USA 3 (Pepi 82, A. Robinson 86, Reyna 89)
Trinidad & Tobago 0
USA: Turner – Dest, Carter-Vickers, Ream, A. Robinson; Musah, McKennie; Tillman (Pepi 66), Reyna, Paredes (B. Aaronson 66); Balogun.
Trinidad & Tobago: Smith – Gomez, Jones, David, J. Garcia, Raymond; Telfer (Hackshaw 46), Phillips (Lee-Him 66), Rampersad (Williams 66), Powder; Shaw (L. Garcia 66).
Sent off: Powder 37.

Nov 17 – Tegucigalpa
Honduras 2 (Lozano 30, Rochez 72)
Mexico 0
Honduras: Menjivar – Najar, Maldonado, Vega, Rosales; Flores, Rodriguez (Lopez 89); R. Rivas (Elis 66), Alvarez (Acosta 89), Palma (Pinto 89); Lozano (Rochez 60).
Mexico: Ochoa (Mallagon 22) – J. Sanchez, Montes, Vasquez, Gallardo; Romo (Chavez 58), Alvarez, E. Sanchez (Quinones 73); Pineda (Antuna 46), Gimenez (Jimenez 58), Lozano.

Nov 18 – Kingston
Jamaica 1 (Nicholson 56)
Canada 2 (David 45+1, Eustaquio 86)
Jamaica: Blake – Lembikisa (Brown 81), Bernard, Pinnock, Leigh; Latibeaudiere, Johnson; Decordova-Reid, Nicholson, Bailey; Antonio (Stewart 20, Phillips 81).
Canada: Borjan – Laryea, Vitoria, Miller, Adekugbe; Buchanan (Hoilett 71), Eustaquio, Kone (Kaye 59), Davies (Millar 90+2); David (Johnston 90+2), Larin (Osorio 71).

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Nov 20 – Panama City
Panama 3 (Fajardo 21, Rodriguez 23, Barcenas 43 pen)
Costa Rica 1 (Calvo 51)
Panama win 6-1 on aggregate
Panama: O. Mosquera – Escobar, Cordoba, Andrade (Ramos 46); Murillo, Martinez (Blackman 74), Carrasquilla, Barcenas; Fajardo (Waterman 46), Rodriguez (Yanis 46); Diaz (Stephens 87).
Costa Rica: Chamorro – Cascante (Gamboa 80), Gonzalez, Calvo; Valverde, Bran, Aguilera, Oviedo (Bennette 73); Aguilar (Campbell 46); Contreras (Zamora 46), Ugalde (K. Vargas 74).

Nov 20 – Port of Spain
Trinidad & Tobago 2 (Moore 43, Jones 57)
USA 1 (A. Robinson 25)
USA win 4-2 on aggregate
Trinidad & Tobago: Smith – Gomez, Jones, David, J. Garcia, Raymond (Russell 90+2); Moore (Shaw 77), Phillips (Lee-Him 77), Rampersad, Gill (Telfer 61); James (Muckette 77).
USA: Turner – Dest, Carter-Vickers, Ream, A. Robinson; Musah, De la Torre (Maloney 90+1); Reyna (Scally 42), B. Aaronson; Pepi (Tillman 65), Balogun.
Sent off: Dest 39.

Nov 21 – Toronto
Canada 2 (Davies 25, Kone 69)
Jamaica 3 (Nicholson 63, 66, Decordova-Reid 78 pen)
4-4 on aggregate. Jamaica win on away goals
Canada: Borjan – Johnston (Millar 84), Cornelius, Miller, Laryea; Eustaquio (Russell-Rowe 89), Kone (Kaye 74), Davies; Buchanan (Hoilett 75), David, Larin (Osorio 74).
Jamaica: Blake – Lembikisa, Lowe, Pinnock, Leigh (T. Gray 90+4); Decordova-Reid, Johnson, Latibeaudiere (Hector 46), D. Gray; Nicholson, Bailey (Bernard, 90).
Sent off: D. Gray 84.

Nov 21 – Mexico City
Mexico 2 (Chavez 43, Alvarez 90+11)
Honduras 0
After Extra-Time. 2-2 on aggregate
Mexico win 4-2 on penalties
Mexico: Mallagon – J. Sanchez (Araujo 104), Montes (Pineda 105), Vasquez, Gallardo; Alvarez, Chavez (Romo 75); Antuna (Huerta 57), E. Sanchez (Quinones 70), Lozano; Martin (Gimenez 70).
Honduras: Menjivar – Najar, Maldonado, Vega (Santos 46), Rosales (E. Rivas 102); Flores, Rodriguez; R. Rivas (Elis 46), Alvarez (Acosta 81), Palma (Garcia 90+8); Lozano (Rochez 70).
Sent off: Maldonado 115.

League B

Group A

Nov 16 – Basseterre
Saint Kitts & Nevis 0
Saint Lucia 0

Nov 16 – Wildey
Sint Maarten 0
Guadeloupe 2 (Plumain 65, Phaeton 90+5)

Nov 19 – Sainte-Anne
Guadeloupe 5 (Phaeton 19, Arconte 74, 90, Bevis 76, Roussillon 80)
Saint Kitts & Nevis 0

Nov 19 – Gros Islet
Saint Lucia 1 (Thomas 12)
Sint Maarten 2 (Amatkarijo 38, Lake 56)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guadeloupe (P)	6	5	0	1	16	3	15
Saint Lucia	6	3	1	2	10	6	10
Sint Maarten	6	2	0	4	6	15	6
St Kitts & Nevis (R)	6	1	1	4	4	12	4

Group B

Nov 17 – St John's
Montserrat 2 (Barzey 37, Strawbridge 57)
Dominican Republic 1 (Reyes 75)

Nov 17 – Wildey
Barbados 0
Nicaragua 4 (Arteaga 22 pen, Rodriguez 43, Coronel 55, Montes 59)

Nov 20 – St John's
Montserrat 4 (Barzey 33, Dyer 35, Daniels 62, Richmond 88)
Barbados 2 (Jules 47, James 90+4)

Nov 21 – Managua
Nicaragua 0
Dominican Republic 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nicaragua (P)	6	5	1	0	17	1	16
Dominican Rep	6	3	1	2	14	6	10
Montserrat	6	3	0	3	9	14	9
Barbados (R)	6	0	0	6	7	26	0

Group C

Nov 17 – Devonshire Parish
Bermuda 3 (Tucker 6, Crichlow 44, Parfitt-Williams 50)
Saint Vincent & Grenadines 1 (McBurnette 34)

Nov 17 – Belmopan
Belize 1 (Martinez 90+6)
French Guiana 0

Nov 21 – Fort-de-France
French Guiana 3 (Ajaiso 29, Lo. Baal 49, Sarrucco 90+4)
Bermuda 0

Nov 21 – St George's
Saint Vincent & Grenadines 3 (Spring 3, Edwards 84, Velox 85)
Belize 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
French Guiana (P)	6	3	1	2	10	6	10
St Vincent & Gren	6	3	0	3	13	14	9
Bermuda	6	2	2	2	8	9	8
Belize (R)	6	2	1	3	5	7	7

Group D

Nov 18 – Piggotts
Antigua & Barbuda 2 (Pereira 52, Deterville 54)
Puerto Rico 3 (W. Rivera 7, 58. Rios 33)

Nov 18 – Santo Domingo
Bahamas -
Guyana -
Match postponed due to adverse weather

Nov 21 – Santo Domingo
Guyana 6 (Benjamin 7, Glasgow 36, Moriah-Welsh 45, De Rosario 67, Lovell 90, Moore 90+3)
Antigua & Barbuda 0

Nov 21 – Bayamon
Puerto Rico 6 (R. Rivera 2, 6, 19, Rios 39, Diaz 74, W. Rivera 77 pen)
Bahamas 1 (Joseph 53)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guyana (P)	5	5	0	0	20	5	15
Puerto Rico	6	4	0	2	22	10	12
Antigua & Barbuda	6	1	1	4	9	22	4
Bahamas	5	0	1	4	7	21	1

League C

Group A

Nov 18 – The Valley
Anguilla 0
Bonaire 3 (Anthony 2, 6 pen, Michiel 73)

Nov 21 – Rincon
Bonaire 0
Saint Martin 4 (Gentes 3, 45+2, Lebon 13, Richardson 46)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saint Martin (P)	4	4	0	0	20	1	12
Bonaire (P)	4	2	0	2	6	6	6
Anguilla	4	0	0	4	0	19	0

Group B

Nov 16 – Upper Bethlehem
US Virgin Islands 1 (Farrell 47)
Aruba 4 (Dania 23, Ostiana 41, 52, Maria 79 pen)

Nov 20 – Oranjestad
Aruba 5 (Groothusen 16, 89, Ostiana 45+5, Maria 55, Dania 77)
Cayman Islands 1 (Studenhofft 49)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aruba (P)	4	4	0	0	14	4	12
Cayman Islands	4	1	1	2	6	10	4
US Virgin Islands	4	0	1	3	5	11	1

Group C

Nov 16 – Road Town
British Virgin Islands 1 (Gallimore 63)
Dominica 2 (Laville 52, Marshall 68)

Nov 20 – Road Town
Dominica 2 (Laville 15, George 61)
Turks & Caicos 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dominica (P)	4	3	1	0	8	2	10
British Virgin Islands	4	1	2	1	7	6	5
Turks & Caicos	4	0	1	3	3	10	1

FRIENDLIES

Nov 12 – Harrison
Guatemala 0
Jamaica 0

Nov 15 – Leuven
Belgium 1 (Carrasco 2)
Serbia 0

Nov 16 – Oslo
Norway 2 (Strand Larsen 3, Bobb 24)
Faroe Islands 0

Nov 17 – Athens
Greece 2 (Konstantelias 10, Giakoumakis 29)
New Zealand 0

Nov 17 – Willemstad
Curacao 1 (J. Bacuna 3)
El Salvador 1 (Flores 87)

Nov 18 – Berlin
Germany 2 (Havertz 5, Fullkrug 49)
Turkey 3 (Kadioglu 38, Yildiz 45+2, Sari 71 pen)

Nov 19 – Limassol
Cyprus 1 (Pittas 22)
Lithuania 0

Nov 20 – Volgograd
Russia 8 (Oblyakov 22, Golovin 30, An. Miranchuk 34, Siljanov 55, Sobolev 66, Prutsev 68, Krivtsov 74, Mostovoy 78)
Cuba 0

Nov 21 – Willemstad
Curacao 1 (Janga 19 pen)
El Salvador 1 (Vasquez 71)

Nov 21 – Vienna
Austria 2 (Sabitzer 29, Baumgartner 73)
Germany 0

Nov 21 – Warsaw
Poland 2 (Frankowski 7, Lewandowski 48)
Latvia 0

Nov 21 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 1 (Idah 28)
New Zealand 1 (Garbett 59)

Club football

EUROPE

2023-24 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group Stage

Group A

Nov 29 – Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 3 (Ziyech 29, 62, Akturkoglu 71)
Manchester United (Eng) 2 (Garnacho 11, Fernandes 18, McTominay 55)

Nov 29 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 0
Copenhagen (Den) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bayern Munich	5	4	1	0	11	6	13
Copenhagen	5	1	2	2	7	8	5
Galatasaray	5	1	2	2	10	12	5
Man United	5	1	1	3	12	14	4

Group B

Nov 29 – Seville
Sevilla (Spa) 2 (Ramos 24, En-Nesyri 47)
PSV (Ned) 3 (Saibari 68, Gudelj 81 og, Pepi 90+2)

Nov 29 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 6 (Havertz 13, G. Jesus 21, Saka 23, Martinelli 27, Odegaard 45+1, Jorginho 86 pen)
Lens (Fra) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Arsenal	5	4	0	1	15	3	12
PSV	5	2	2	1	7	9	8
Lens	5	1	2	2	4	10	5
Sevilla	5	0	2	3	6	10	2

Group C

Nov 29 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 4 (Rodrygo 11, Bellingham 22, Paz 84, Joselu 90+4)
Napoli (Ita) 2 (Simeone 9, Zambo Anguissa 47)

Nov 29 – Braga
Braga (Por) 1 (Djalo 51)
Union Berlin (Ger) 1 (Gosens 42)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Madrid	5	5	0	0	13	5	15
Napoli	5	2	1	2	8	9	7
Braga	5	1	1	3	6	10	4
Union Berlin	5	0	2	3	4	7	2

Group D

Nov 29 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 3 (Joao Mario 5, 13, 34)
Internazionale (Ita) 3 (Arnautovic 51, Frattesi 58, Sanchez 72 pen)

Nov 29 – San Sebastian
Real Sociedad (Spa) 0
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Sociedad	5	3	2	0	7	2	11
Internazionale	5	3	2	0	8	5	11
RB Salzburg	5	1	1	3	3	5	4
Benfica	5	0	1	4	4	10	1

Group E

Nov 28 – Rome
Lazio (Ita) 2 (Immobile 82, 85)
Celtic (Sco) 0

Nov 28 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 1 (Wieffer 77)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 3 (Geertruida 14 og, Hermoso 57, Gimenez 81 og)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Madrid	5	3	2	0	15	6	11
Lazio	5	3	1	1	7	5	10
Feyenoord	5	2	0	3	8	8	6
Celtic	5	0	1	4	3	14	1

Group F

Nov 28 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 1 (Mbappe 90+8 pen)
Newcastle United (Eng) 1 (Isak 24)

Nov 28 – Milan
Milan (Ita) 1 (Chukwueze 37)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 3 (Reus 10 pen, Bynoe-Gittens 59, Adeyemi 69)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
B. Dortmund	5	3	1	1	6	3	10
PSG	5	2	1	2	8	7	7
Newcastle	5	1	2	2	5	5	5
Milan	5	1	2	2	3	7	5

Group G

Nov 28 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 3 (Haaland 54, Foden 70, Alvarez 87)
RB Leipzig (Ger) 2 (Openda 13, 33)

Nov 28 – Bern
Young Boys (Sui) 2 (Nedeljkovic 8 og, Blum 29)
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Man City	5	5	0	0	15	5	15
RB Leipzig	5	3	0	2	11	9	9
Young Boys	5	1	1	3	6	11	4
Red Star	5	0	1	4	5	12	1

Group H

Nov 28 – Hamburg
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 1 (Matviyenko 12)
Antwerp (Bel) 0

Nov 28 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 2 (Cancelo 32, Felix 57)
Porto (Por) 1 (Pepe Aquino 30)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Barcelona	5	4	0	1	10	3	12
Porto	5	3	0	2	10	5	9
Shakhtar	5	3	0	2	7	7	9
Antwerp	5	0	0	5	3	15	0

2023-24 UEFA EUROPA LEAGUE

Group Stage

Group A

Nov 30 – Freiburg
Freiburg (Ger) 5 (Gregoritsch 3, 8, 36, Sildillia 42, Doan 77)
Olympiakos (Gre) 0

Nov 30 – Backa Topola
TSC Backa Topola (Srb) 0
West Ham United (Eng) 1 (Soucek 89)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
West Ham	5	4	0	1	8	4	12
Freiburg	5	4	0	1	17	5	12
Olympiakos	5	1	1	3	6	12	4
TSC	5	0	1	4	4	14	1

Group B

Nov 30 – Athens
AEK Athens (Gre) 0
Brighton (Eng) 1 (Joao Pedro 55 pen)

Nov 30 – Marseille
Marseille (Fra) 4 (Aubameyang 9 pen, 48, 90+3 pen, Mbemba 26)
Ajax (Ned) 3 (Brobbey 10, 30, Akpom 79)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Marseille	5	3	2	0	14	9	11
Brighton	5	3	1	1	9	5	10
AEK Athens	5	1	1	3	5	9	4
Ajax	5	0	2	3	7	12	2

Group C

Nov 30 – Prague
Sparta Prague (Cze) 1 (Haraslin 54)
Real Betis (Spa) 0

Nov 30 – Glasgow
Rangers (Sco) 1 (McCausland 49)
Aris Limassol (Cyp) 1 (Babicka 28)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Betis	5	3	0	2	7	4	9
Rangers	5	2	2	1	5	4	8
Sparta Prague	5	2	1	2	6	6	7
Aris Limassol	5	1	1	3	6	10	4

Group D

Nov 30 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 1 (Scamacca 23)
Sporting (Por) 1 (Edwards 56)

Nov 30 – Graz
Sturm Graz (Aut) 0
Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 1 (Yeboah 81)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atalanta	5	3	2	0	8	4	11
Sporting	5	2	2	1	7	6	8
Sturm Graz	5	1	1	3	4	6	4
Rakow	5	1	1	3	3	6	4

Group E

Nov 30 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 4 (Diaz 12, Gakpo 15, 90+2, Salah 51)
LASK (Aut) 0

Nov 30 – Toulouse
Toulouse (Fra) 0
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool	5	4	0	1	16	5	12
Toulouse	5	2	2	1	6	8	8
Union SG	5	1	2	2	3	7	5
LASK	5	1	0	4	5	10	3

Group F

Nov 30 – Budapest
Maccabi Haifa (Isr) 0
Rennes (Fra) 3 (Terrier 29, Gouiri 47, Rieder 90+3)

Nov 30 – Villarreal
Villarreal (Spa) 3 (Baena 29, Comesana 34, Morales 47)
Panathinaikos (Gre) 2 (Palacios 66, Ioannidis 81)

Dec 6 – Villarreal
Villarreal (Spa) 0
Maccabi Haifa (Isr) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rennes	5	4	0	1	11	3	12
Villarreal	5	3	1	1	6	5	10
Panathinaikos	5	1	1	3	6	8	4
Maccabi Haifa	5	0	2	3	1	8	2

Group G

Nov 30 – Geneva
Servette (Sui) 1 (Bedia 50)
Roma (Ita) 1 (Lukaku 21)

Nov 30 – Tiraspol
Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 2 (Tovar 45+3, Ngom Mbekeli 56)
Slavia Prague (Cze) 3 (Jurecka 19, Zafeiris 78, Tijani 90+5 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Slavia Prague	5	4	0	1	13	4	12
Roma	5	3	1	1	9	4	10
Servette	5	1	2	2	4	9	5
Sheriff Tiraspol	5	0	1	4	5	14	1

Group H

Nov 30 – Molde
Molde (Nor) 2 (Eriksen 82, 87)
Qarabag (Aze) 2 (Juninho 12, Mustafazade 90+5)

Nov 30 – Gothenburg
BK Hacken (Swe) 0
B. Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Boniface 14, Schick 74)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Leverkusen	5	5	0	0	14	2	15
Qarabag	5	2	1	2	5	8	7
Molde	5	2	1	2	11	7	7
BK Hacken	5	0	0	5	2	15	0

2023-24 UEFA CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Group Stage

Group A

Nov 30 – Ljubljana
Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 0
Lille (Fra) 2 (Cabella 15, Yazici 75)

Nov 30 – Torshavn
KI Klaksvik (Fro) 1 (Mikkelsen 17)
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 2 (Kucka 24, 62)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lille	5	3	2	0	7	2	11
S. Bratislava	5	3	1	1	7	5	10
KI Klaksvik	5	1	1	3	5	6	4
Olimpija	5	1	0	4	2	8	3

Group B

Nov 25 – Backa Topola
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 3 (Zahavi 45+2, Peretz 46, 60)
Zorya Luhansk (Ukr) 2 (Guerrero 71, Horbach 88)

Nov 30 – Gent
Gent (Bel) 4 (Fofana 20, Batahov 49 og, Orban 55, Gandelman 75)
Zorya Luhansk (Ukr) 1 (Nahnoinyi 82)

Nov 30 – Reykjavik
Breidablik (Isl) 1 (Eyjolfsson 61)
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 2 (Biton 35, Zahavi 82)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Gent	5	4	1	0	15	4	13
Maccabi Tel Aviv	5	4	0	1	11	8	12
Zorya Luhansk	5	1	1	3	6	11	4
Breidablik	5	0	0	5	5	14	0

Group C

Nov 30 – Astana
Astana (Kaz) 0
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 2 (Vidovic 48, Kaneko 79)

Nov 30 – Pristina
Ballkani (Kos) 0
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (Sulc 81)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Viktoria Plzen	5	5	0	0	6	1	15
Dinamo Zagreb	5	2	0	3	7	5	6
Astana	5	1	1	3	4	10	4
Ballkani	5	1	1	3	3	4	4

Group D

Nov 30 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 5 (Pellegrino 40, 78, Brunstad Fet 52, Berg 65, Kapskarmo 88)
Lugano (Sui) 2 (Celar 69, Babic 86)

Nov 30 – Istanbul
Besiktas (Tur) 0
Club Brugge (Bel) 5 (Nielsen 4, Thiago 14, 46, Onyedika 50, Skov Olsen 70)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Club Brugge	5	4	1	0	12	2	13
Bodo/Glimt	5	3	1	1	10	5	10
Lugano	5	1	1	3	6	12	4
Besiktas	5	0	1	4	5	14	1

Group E

Nov 30 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 1 (Pavlidis 59 pen)
Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 0

Nov 30 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 2 (Diaby 4, Moreno 58)
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 1 (Muci 20)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aston Villa	5	4	0	1	11	6	12
Legia Warsaw	5	3	0	2	8	6	9
AZ	5	2	0	3	7	10	6
Zrinjski Mostar	5	1	0	4	5	9	3

Group F

Nov 30 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Martinez Quarta 45+4, Gonzalez 82 pen)
Genk (Bel) 1 (Kayembe 45)

Nov 30 – Leskovac
Cukaricki (Srb) 1 (Adzic 11)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 2 (Zachariassen 83, Pesic 90+8)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fiorentina	5	3	2	0	13	5	11
Ferencvaros	5	2	3	0	8	5	9
Genk	5	1	3	1	6	5	6
Cukaricki	5	0	0	5	2	14	0

Group G

Nov 30 – Helsinki
HJK (Fin) 2 (Bande 16, Hostikka 33)
Aberdeen (Sco) 2 (MacDonald 41, Duk 56)

Nov 30 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 1 (Marmoush 58)
PAOK (Gre) 2 (Kedziora 55, Zivkovic 73)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PAOK	5	4	1	0	12	8	13
E. Frankfurt	5	3	0	2	11	5	9
Aberdeen	5	0	3	2	8	10	3
HJK	5	0	2	3	5	13	2

Group H

Nov 30 – Farum
Nordsjaelland (Den) 6 (Hey 21, Svensson 25, Nygren 55, 75, 84, Rasmussen 66)
Fenerbahce (Tur) 1 (Batshuayi 43)

Nov 30 – Trnava
Spartak Trnava (Svk) 1 (Daniel 78)
Ludogorets (Bul) 2 (Duah 74, Tissera 90+5)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nordsjaelland	5	3	1	1	17	6	10
Ludogorets	5	3	0	2	10	11	9
Fenerbahce	5	3	0	2	9	11	9
Spartak Trnava	5	0	1	4	3	11	1

Final Tables 2023

BELARUS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dinamo Minsk (C)	28	22	3	3	72	21	69
Neman Grodno	28	19	5	4	60	22	62
Torpedo BelAZ	28	12	13	3	33	18	49
Isloch	28	14	5	9	40	29	47
BATE Borisov	28	14	5	9	49	32	47
Gomel	28	11	8	9	45	48	41
Slavia Mozyr	28	11	7	10	32	30	40
Slutsk	28	9	8	11	38	40	35
Minsk	28	8	9	11	21	26	33
Dinamo Brest	28	9	3	16	33	50	30
Smorgon	28	7	3	18	28	59	24
Naftan	28	6	5	17	28	57	23
Shakhtyor Soligorsk*	28	13	5	10	50	40	9
Energetik-BGU** (R)	28	7	6	15	25	42	4
Belshina*** (R)	28	3	5	20	21	61	3

*Deducted 35 points
**Deducted 23 points and lost the relegation play-off 1-0 on aggregate against Vitebsk
***Deducted 11 points

ESTONIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Flora (C)	36	23	10	3	74	24	79
FCI Levadia	36	22	11	3	67	24	77
Tallinna Kalev	36	14	11	11	49	41	53
Paide Linnameeskond	36	13	14	9	50	34	53
Nomme Kalju	36	12	13	11	50	42	49
Vaprus	36	12	12	12	40	43	48
Kuressaare	36	12	7	17	36	60	43
Narva Trans	36	12	2	22	32	64	38
Tammeka*	36	5	12	19	33	65	27
Harju Laagri (R)	36	5	8	23	27	61	23

*Won the relegation play-off 6-1 on aggregate against Vlimsi

FAROE ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
KI Klaksvik (C)	27	21	4	2	66	19	67
Vikingur	27	19	3	5	76	23	60
Havnar Boltfelag	27	18	4	5	68	23	58
B36 Torshavn	27	18	3	6	54	27	57
07 Vestur	27	12	4	11	42	41	40
EB/Streymur	27	7	4	16	25	53	25
B68 Toftir	27	4	11	12	29	48	23
IF	27	6	2	19	23	67	20
AB Argir (R)	27	5	3	19	27	63	18
TB Tvoroyi (R)	27	4	4	19	15	61	16

FINLAND

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
HJK (C)	27	15	8	4	50	26	53
KuPS	27	16	5	6	41	20	53
VPS	27	15	4	8	41	26	49
SJK	27	12	6	9	35	33	42
Honka	27	12	5	10	29	27	41
Inter Turku	27	10	5	12	35	40	35

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Oulu	27	11	5	11	41	45	38
Ilves	27	8	9	10	35	33	33
Haka	27	7	11	9	35	42	32
Lahti	27	7	8	12	26	41	29
Mariehamn*	27	5	7	15	28	40	22
KTP (R)	27	5	5	17	21	44	20

*Won the relegation play-off 3-0 on aggregate against Gnistan

GEORGIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dinamo Batumi (C)	36	21	11	4	83	41	74
Dinamo Tbilisi	36	21	8	7	93	49	71
Torpedo Kutaisi	36	16	12	8	55	37	60
Dila Gori	36	17	9	10	56	39	60
Samgurali	36	16	9	11	53	51	57
Saburtalo	36	14	9	13	58	49	51
Gagra	36	10	8	18	47	65	38
Telavi*	36	10	7	19	34	62	37
Samtredia**	36	9	6	21	50	62	33
Shukura*** (R)	36	4	5	27	38	112	11

*Won the relegation play-off 5-1 on aggregate against Spaeri Tbilisi
**Won the relegation play-off 5-4 on aggregate against Gareji Sagarejo
***Deducted 6 points

ICELAND

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vikingur Reykjavik (C)	27	21	3	3	76	30	66
Valur	27	17	4	6	66	35	55
Stjarnan	27	14	4	9	55	29	46
Breidablik	27	12	5	10	52	49	41
FH	27	12	4	11	49	54	40
KR	27	10	7	10	38	48	37

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
KA	27	12	5	10	42	45	41
Fylkir	27	7	8	12	43	55	29
HK	27	6	9	12	41	55	27
Fram	27	7	6	14	40	56	27
IBV (R)	27	6	7	14	31	50	25
Keflavik (R)	27	2	10	15	27	54	16

KAZAKHSTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ordabasy (C)	26	18	4	4	48	21	58
Astana	26	16	5	5	36	24	53
Aktobe	26	13	11	2	44	23	50
Kairat	26	12	8	6	44	32	44
Kyzyl-Zhar	26	11	6	9	25	23	39
Kaisar	26	10	6	10	31	30	36
Atyrau	26	8	10	8	24	27	34
Tobol	26	9	7	10	29	33	34
Maqtaaral	26	8	5	13	29	32	29
Shakhter Karagandy	26	7	8	11	31	36	29
Zhetysu	26	8	5	13	27	38	29
Okzhetpes (R)	26	7	6	13	26	37	27
Kaspiy (R)	26	4	8	14	28	44	20
Aksu (R)	26	5	3	18	23	45	18

LATVIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
RFS (C)	36	27	8	1	96	18	89
Riga	36	27	7	2	89	21	88
Auda	36	16	10	10	44	39	58
Valmiera	36	14	11	11	47	40	53
Liepaja	36	14	9	13	52	54	51
Jelgava	36	10	10	16	42	57	40
Daugavpils	36	9	9	18	40	52	36
Tukums	36	9	8	19	47	83	35
Metta*	36	8	9	19	41	63	33
Super Nova (R)	36	3	5	28	25	96	14

*Won the relegation play-off 8-2 on aggregate against Skantse

LITHUANIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Panevezys (C)	36	26	9	1	64	14	87
Zalgiris	36	23	6	7	67	28	75
Siauliai	36	16	14	6	51	35	62
Kauno Zalgiris	36	15	14	7	61	40	59
Hegelmann	36	18	5	13	62	43	59
Banga	36	10	6	20	22	52	36
Suduva	36	10	5	21	28	60	35
Dainava	36	7	10	19	25	40	31
Dziugas*	36	4	13	19	25	57	25
Riteriai (R)	36	5	10	21	26	62	25

*Won the relegation play-off 2-1 on aggregate against Be1 NFA

NORWAY

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bodo/Glimt (C)	30	22	4	4	78	38	70
Brann	30	19	4	7	55	35	61
Tromso	30	19	4	7	48	33	61
Viking	30	18	4	8	61	48	58
Molde	30	15	6	9	65	39	51
Lillestrom	30	13	4	13	49	49	43
Stromsgodset	30	13	3	14	37	35	42
Sarpsborg	30	12	5	13	55	52	41
Rosenborg	30	11	6	13	46	50	39
Odd	30	10	8	12	42	44	38
HamKam	30	10	4	16	39	59	34
Haugesund	30	9	6	15	34	40	33
Sandefjord	30	8	7	15	47	55	31
Valerenga* (R)	30	7	8	15	39	50	29
Stabaek (R)	30	7	8	15	30	48	29
Aalesund (R)	30	5	3	22	23	73	18

Lost 5-4 on penalties to Kristiansund in the relegation play-off after a 2-2 aggregate draw

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shamrock Rovers (C)	36	20	12	4	67	27	72
Derry City	36	18	11	7	57	24	65
St Patrick's Athletic	36	19	5	12	59	42	62
Shelbourne	36	15	15	6	44	27	60
Dundalk	36	17	7	12	59	44	58
Bohemians	36	16	10	10	53	40	58
Drogheda United	36	10	11	15	40	54	41
Sligo Rovers	36	10	7	19	36	51	37
Cork City* (R)	36	8	7	21	35	64	31
UCD (R)	36	2	5	29	19	96	11

Lost the Premier Division play-off final 2-1 against Waterford after extra-time

SWEDEN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Malmo (C)	30	20	4	6	62	27	64
Elfsborg	30	20	4	6	59	26	64
Hacken	30	18	3	9	69	39	57
Djurgarden	30	15	5	10	41	36	50
Varnamo	30	14	3	13	37	34	45
Kalmar	30	13	6	11	35	40	45
Hammarby	30	11	11	8	41	39	44
Sirius	30	12	6	12	51	44	42
Norrkoping	30	12	5	13	45	45	41
Mjallby	30	12	5	13	32	34	41
AIK	30	9	9	12	34	38	36
Halmstad	30	9	9	12	30	44	36
IFK Goteborg	30	8	10	12	33	37	34
Brommapojkarna*	30	10	3	17	40	53	33
Degerfors (R)	30	7	5	18	30	62	26
Varberg (R)	30	3	6	21	26	67	15

Won the relegation play-off 7-0 on aggregate against Utsiktens

ASIA

2023-24 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group Stage

Group A

Nov 28 – Al Ain
Al Ain (UAE) 1 (Khalfan 18)
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 3 (Erkinov 55, 62, Ceran 78)

Nov 28 – Riyadh
Al Fayha (KSA) 3 (Nwakaeme 19 pen, Sakala 45+6, Mandash 75)
Ahal (Tkm) 1 (Tagayew 36 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ain	5	4	0	1	15	8	12
Pakhtakor	5	2	1	2	7	7	7
Al Fayha	5	2	0	3	8	9	6
Ahal	5	1	1	3	5	11	4

Group B

Nov 27 – Qarshi
Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb) 3 (Mateus 47, Abdurakhmatov 50, Stanojevic 68)
Al Faisaly (Jor) 1 (Bani Hani 45+6)

Nov 27 – Sharjah
Sharjah (UAE) 0
Al Sadd (Qat) 2 (Plata 9, Bounedjah 60)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nasaf Qarshi	5	3	1	1	8	4	10
Sharjah	5	2	2	1	3	3	8
Al Sadd	5	2	1	2	9	5	7
Al Faisaly	5	1	0	4	3	11	3

Group C

Nov 27 – Olmaliq
AGMK (Uzb) 1 (Boakye 78)
Al Ittihad (KSA) 2 (Hamdallah 30, 34)

Nov 27 – Tehran
Sepahan (Irn) 1 (Ahmadzadeh 4)
Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ittihad	5	4	0	1	9	3	12
Sepahan	5	3	1	1	15	6	10
Al Quwa Al Jawiya	5	2	1	2	6	5	7
AGMK	5	0	0	5	3	19	0

Group D

Nov 28 – Namangan
Navbahor (Uzb) 0
Al Hilal (KSA) 2 (Malcom 68, S. Al Dawsari 85)

Nov 28 – Tehran
Nassaji Mazandaran (Irn) 2 (Reza Azadi 14, Nongtdu 32 og)
Mumbai City (Ind) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal	5	4	1	0	14	1	13
Navbahor	5	3	1	1	9	5	10
Nassaji Mazandaran	5	2	0	3	6	8	6
Mumbai City	5	0	0	5	0	15	0

Group E

Nov 27 – Riyadh
Al Nassr (KSA) 0
Persepolis (Irn) 0

Nov 27 – Doha
Al Duhail (Qat) 2 (Olunga 47, 89)
Istiklol (Tjk) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Nassr	5	4	1	0	12	6	13
Persepolis	5	2	2	1	4	3	8
Al Duhail	5	1	1	3	7	8	4
Istiklol	5	0	2	3	2	8	2

Group F

Nov 29 – Hong Kong
Kitchee (Hkg) 1 (Jantscher 69)
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) 2 (Moon Seon-min 2, Song Min-kyu 38)

Nov 29 – Rangsit
Bangkok United (Tha) 1 (Rungrath 86)
Lion City Sailors (Sgp) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bangkok Utd	5	4	1	0	9	5	13
Jeonbuk HM	5	3	0	2	9	7	9
Lion City Sailors	5	2	0	3	5	7	6
Kitchee	5	0	1	4	5	9	1

Group G

Nov 28 – Incheon
Incheon United (Kor) 2 (Hong Si-hoo 11, Hernandes 69)
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 1 (Elber 83)

Nov 28 – Jinan
Shandong Taishan (Chn) 6 (Moises 26, 56, Cryzan 49, 68, 89, Song Long 61)
Kaya-Iloilo (Phi) 1 (Gayoso 21)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shandong Taishan	5	4	0	1	14	4	12
Incheon United	5	3	0	2	11	8	9
Yokohama FM	5	3	0	2	9	7	9
Kaya-Iloilo	5	0	0	5	3	18	0

Group H

Nov 29 – Huzhou
Zhejiang (Chn) 3 (Leonardo 27, Andrijasevic 77, Lucas Possignolo 83)
Buriram Utd (Tha) 2 (Vuckic 9, Doumbouya 87)

Nov 29 – Tokyo
Ventforet Kofu (Jpn) 3 (Inoue 8, Torikai 43, Miyazaki 85)
Melbourne City (Aus) 3 (Talbot 5, Arslan 59 pen, Jakolis 64)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ventforet Kofu	5	2	2	1	8	6	8
Melbourne City	5	2	2	1	7	5	8
Buriram United	5	2	0	3	7	7	6
Zhejiang	5	2	0	3	8	12	6

Group I

Nov 28 – Pathum Thani
BG Pathum United (Tha) 1 (Sergeev 69)
Ulsan Hyundai (Kor) 3 (Jakkapan 20 og, Ludwigson 27, Lee Myung-jae 62)

Nov 28 – Kawasaki
Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn) 5 (Ienaga 8, Damiao 50, Marcinho 60, Kobayashi 69, Yamane 88)
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kawasaki Frontale	5	5	0	0	15	4	15
Ulsan Hyundai	5	3	0	2	10	6	9
Johor Darul Ta'zim	5	2	0	3	7	12	6
BG Pathum Utd	5	0	0	5	8	18	0

Group J

Nov 28 – Saitama
Urawa Red Diamonds (Kor) 2 (Scholz 37 pen, Kante 90)
Wuhan Three Towns (Chn) 1 (Davidson 68)

Nov 28 – Pohang
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 2 (Lee Ho-jae 33 pen, Ha Chang-rae 53)
Hanoi (Vie) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pohang Steelers	5	5	0	0	13	4	15
Urawa Reds	5	2	1	2	11	7	7
Wuhan Three Towns	5	1	1	3	7	10	4
Hanoi	5	1	0	4	5	15	3

2023-24 AFC CUP

Group Stage

Group A

Nov 27: Al Nahda (Oma) 2-1 Al Ahed (Lbn)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Nahda	4	3	0	1	6	4	9
Al Ahed	3	1	0	2	3	4	3
Al Fotuwa	3	1	0	2	2	3	3
Jabal Al Mukaber*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Withdrew

Group B

Nov 28: Al Ittihad (Syr) 0-2 Al Wehdat (Jor); Al Kuwait (Kuw) 0-1 Al Kahrabaa (Irq)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Kahrabaa	5	3	1	1	7	4	10
Al Wehdat	5	3	0	2	9	6	9
Al Kuwait	5	1	3	1	4	4	6
Al Ittihad	5	0	2	3	2	8	2

Group C

Nov 27: Al Arabi (Kuw) 1-1 Al Zawraa (Irq); Al Riffa (Bhr) 6-1 Nejmeh (Lbn)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Riffa	5	4	1	0	14	2	13
Al Zawraa	5	2	2	1	9	6	8
Al Arabi	5	1	2	2	4	7	5
Nejmeh	5	0	1	4	3	14	1

Group D

Nov 27: Mohun Bagan (Ind) 2-5 Odisha (Ind); Bashundhara Kings (Ban) 2-1 Maziya (Mdv)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bashundhara Kings	5	3	1	1	10	9	10
Odisha	5	3	0	2	16	12	9
Mohun Bagan	5	2	1	2	11	10	7
Maziya	5	1	0	4	8	14	3

Group E

Nov 30: Merw Mary (Tkm) 1-1 Ravshan Kulob (Tjk); Altyn Asyr (Tkm) 2-4 Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Abdysh-Ata Kant	5	4	1	0	10	3	13
Altyn Asyr	5	2	1	2	6	9	7
Merw Mary	5	0	3	2	3	5	3
Ravshan Kulob	5	0	3	2	2	4	3

Group F

Nov 30: Phnom Penh Crown (Cam) 4-0 DH Cebu (Phi); Macarthur (Aus) 4-0 Shan United (Mya)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Macarthur	5	4	0	1	20	5	12
Phnom Penh Crown	5	4	0	1	14	5	12
DH Cebu	5	1	1	3	4	16	4
Shan United	5	0	1	4	1	13	1

Group G

Nov 29: Central Coast Mariners (Aus) 1-1 Terengganu (Mas); Bali United (Idn) 5-2 Stallion Laguna (Phi)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Central Coast	5	3	1	1	18	7	10
Terengganu	5	2	3	0	8	6	9
Bali United	5	2	1	2	15	13	7
Stallion Laguna	5	0	1	4	9	24	1

Group H

Nov 30: PSM Makassar (Idn) 1-1 Haiphong (Vie); Hougang United (Sgp) 1-4 Sabah (Mas)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sabah	5	4	0	1	18	6	12
Haiphong	5	2	1	2	9	9	7
PSM Makassar	5	2	1	2	7	11	7
Hougang United	5	1	0	4	6	14	3

Group I

Nov 30: Taichung Futuro (Tpe) 1-0 Chao Pak Kei (Mac); Taiwan Steel (Tpe) 3-0 Ulaanbaatar (Mng)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Taichung Futuro	5	4	0	1	7	6	12
Ulaanbaatar	5	3	0	2	5	6	9
Taiwan Steel	4	2	0	2	10	6	6
Chao Pak Kei	4	0	0	4	0	4	0

Final Tables 2023

JAPAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vissel Kobe (C)	34	21	8	5	60	29	71
Yokohama F. Marinos	34	19	7	8	63	40	64
Sanfrecce Hiroshima	34	17	7	10	42	28	58
Urawa Reds	34	15	12	7	42	27	57
Kashima Antlers	34	14	10	10	43	34	52
Nagoya Grampus	34	14	10	10	41	36	52
Avispa Fukuoka	34	15	6	13	37	43	51
Kawasaki Frontale	34	14	8	12	51	45	50
Cerezo Osaka	34	15	4	15	39	34	49
Albirex Niigata	34	11	12	11	36	40	45
FC Tokyo	34	12	7	15	42	46	43
Consadole Sapporo	34	10	10	14	56	61	40
Kyoto Sanga	34	12	4	18	40	45	40
Sagan Tosu	34	9	11	14	43	47	38
Shonan Bellmare	34	8	10	16	40	56	34
Gamba Osaka	34	9	7	18	38	61	34
Kashiwa Reysol	34	6	15	13	33	47	33
Yokohama FC (R)	34	7	8	19	31	58	29

SOUTH KOREA

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ulsan Hyundai (C)	38	23	7	8	63	42	76
Pohang Steelers	38	16	16	6	53	40	64
Gwangju FC	38	16	11	11	47	35	59
Jeonbuk H. Motors	38	16	9	13	45	35	57
Incheon United	38	14	14	10	46	42	56
Daegu FC	38	13	14	11	42	43	53

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
FC Seoul	38	14	13	11	63	49	55
Daejeon Hana Citizen	38	12	15	11	56	58	51
Jeju United	38	10	11	17	43	49	41
Gangwon FC*	38	6	16	16	30	41	34
Suwon FC**	38	8	9	21	44	76	33
Suwon Bluewings (R)	38	8	9	21	35	57	33

*Won their relegation play-off 2-1 on aggregate against Gimpo Citizen
**Won their relegation play-off 6-4 on aggregate after extra-time against Busan IPark

UZBEKISTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pakhtakor (C)	26	16	5	5	41	25	53
Nasaf Qarshi	26	13	9	4	31	16	48
Navbahor	26	14	5	7	44	19	47
AGMK	26	13	7	6	43	34	46
Neftchi	26	11	12	3	33	18	45
Termez Surkhon	26	11	7	8	28	24	40
Andijan	26	12	4	10	27	25	40
Bunyodkor	26	10	7	9	30	33	37
Olympic	26	8	7	11	26	32	31
Metalourg	26	8	6	12	26	35	30
Sogdiana	26	7	6	13	29	38	27
Qizilqum*	26	6	7	13	22	33	25
Turon Yaypan (R)	26	3	7	16	16	41	16
Buxoro (R)	26	4	3	19	12	35	15

*Won their relegation play-off 2-1 against Kokand-1912

CONCACAF

2023 CARIBBEAN CUP

Third-Place Match – 1st Leg

Nov 30 – Kingston
Harbour View (Jam) 1 (Thomas 15 og)
Moca (Dom) 2 (Ascona 43, Francisco 65)

Third-Place Match – 2nd Leg

Dec 5 – Santiago de los Caballeros
Moca (Dom) 1 (Valencia 68)
Harbour View (Jam) 1 (Stewart 65)
Moca win 3-2 on aggregate

Final – 1st Leg

Nov 30 – Paramaribo
Robinhood (Sur) 1 (Andro 69)
Cavalier (Jam) 0

Final – 2nd Leg

Dec 6 – Kingston
Cavalier (Jam) 0
Robinhood (Sur) 2 (Singodikromo 89, Rigters 90+4)
Robinhood win 3-0 on aggregate

2023 CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Final – 1st Leg

Nov 28 – Esteli
Real Esteli (Nca) 0
Alajuelense (Crc) 3 (Navarro 32, Barrantes 45+2, Gondola 49)

Final – 2nd Leg

Dec 5 – Alajuela
Alajuelense (Crc) 1 (Campbell 5)
Real Esteli (Nca) 1 (B. Bonilla 47)
Alajuelense win 4-1 on aggregate

UNITED STATES: MLS CUP 2023

Wild Card Round

Eastern Conference

Oct 25 – New Jersey
New York Red Bulls 5 (Manoel 10, 37, 78, Tolkin 26, Barlow 56)
Charlotte FC 2 (Vargas 49, Agyemang 64)

Western Conference

Oct 25 – Kansas City
Sporting Kansas City 0
San Jose Earthquakes 0
Sporting Kansas City win 4-2 on penalties

Round One

Eastern Conference – Match 1

Oct 28 – Chester
Philadelphia Union 3 (Gazdag 19 pen, Uhre 26, Harriel 37)
New England Revolution 1 (Bou 68)

Oct 29 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati 3 (Barreal 23, 89, Acosta 35)
New York Red Bulls 0

Oct 30 – Orlando
Orlando City 1 (Cartagena 41)
Nashville SC 0

Nov 1 – Columbus
Columbus Crew 2 (Hernandez 45+1, 51 pen)
Atlanta United 0

Eastern Conference – Match 2

Nov 4 – Harrison
New York Red Bulls 1 (Barlow 45)
FC Cincinnati 1 (Boupendza 75)
FC Cincinnati win 8-7 on penalties and win the series 2-0

Nov 7 – Nashville
Nashville SC 0
Orlando City 1 (Angulo 6)
Orlando City win the series 2-0

Nov 7 – Atlanta
Atlanta United 4 (Giakoumakis 38, Silva 45+4, Mosquera 83, Almada 88)
Columbus Crew 2 (Hernandez 45, Arfsten 90+5)

Nov 8 – Foxborough
New England Revolution 0
Philadelphia Union 1 (Donovan 79)
Philadelphia Union win the series 2-0

Eastern Conference – Match 3

Nov 12 – Columbus
Columbus Crew 4 (Nagbe 9, Amundsen 17, Matan 33, Rossi 47)
Atlanta United 2 (Giakoumakis 35, Silva 50)
Columbus Crew win the series 2-1

Western Conference – Match 1

Oct 28 – Los Angeles
Los Angeles FC 5 (Hollingshead 18, 52, Bouanga 29, 64, Murillo 80)
Vancouver Whitecaps 2 (White 27, Adekugbe 40)

Oct 29 – Houston
Houston Dynamo 2 (Herrera 22, Bassi 79)
Real Salt Lake 1 (Luna 54)

Oct 29 – St Louis
St Louis City 1 (Parker 28)
Sporting Kansas City 4 (Ndenbe 27, Walter 36, Kinda 39, Salloi 61)

Oct 30 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders 2 (Rusnak 43 pen, Morris 74)
FC Dallas 0

Western Conference – Match 2

Nov 4 – Frisco
FC Dallas 3 (Arriola 6, Ferreira 18 pen, Obrian 89)
Seattle Sounders 1 (Morris 48)

Nov 5 – Kansas City
Sporting Kansas City 2 (Ndenbe 45+1, Salloi 73)
St Louis City 1 (Pompeu 86)
Sporting Kansas City win the series 2-0

Nov 5 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps 0
Los Angeles FC 1 (Bouanga 24 pen)
Los Angeles FC win the series 2-0

Nov 6 – Sandy
Real Salt Lake 1 (Savarino 70)
Houston Dynamo 1 (Bassi 28)
Real Salt Lake win 5-4 on penalties

Western Conference – Match 3

Nov 11 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders 1 (Rusnak 36)
FC Dallas 0
Seattle Sounders win the series 2-1

Nov 11 – Houston
Houston Dynamo 1 (Baird 28)
Real Salt Lake 1 (Luna 65)
Houston Dynamo win 4-3 on penalties and win the series 2-1

Semi-Finals

Eastern Conference

Nov 25 – Orlando
Orlando City 0
Columbus Crew 2 (Ramirez 93, Hernandez 118)
After Extra-Time

Nov 25 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati 1 (Mosquera 90+4)
Philadelphia Union 0

Western Conference

Nov 26 – Houston
Houston Dynamo 1 (Escobar 39)
Sporting Kansas City 0

Nov 26 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders 0
Los Angeles FC 1 (Bouanga 30)

Conference Finals

Eastern Conference

Dec 2 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati 2 (Vazquez 14, Acosta 45+3)
Columbus Crew 3 (Powell 75 og, Rossi 86, Ramirez 115)
After Extra-Time

Western Conference

Dec 2 – Los Angeles
Los Angeles FC 2 (Hollingshead 44, Escobar 80 og)
Houston Dynamo 0

MLS Cup 2023

Dec 9 – Columbus
Columbus Crew 2 (Hernandez 33 pen, Yeboah 37)
Los Angeles FC 1 (Bouanga 74)
Columbus Crew: Schulte – Moreira, Camacho, Amundsen; Farsi (Ramirez 86), Nagbe (Zawadzki 84), Morris, Yeboah (Cheberko 83); Matan, Rossi (Molino 90+1); Hernandez (Gresse 85).
Los Angeles FC: Crepeau – Hollingshead, Murillo, Chiellini, Palacios (Palencia 87); Tillman (Bogusz 60), Sanchez (Gonzalez 87), Acosta (Krastev 76); Olivera, Vela, Bouanga.

AFRICA

2023 AFRICAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Oct 20 – Dar es Salaam
Simba (Tan) 2 (Denis 53, Kanoute 59)
Al Ahly (Egy) 2 (Slim 45+1, Kahraba 63)

Oct 21 – Luanda
Petro Atletico (Ang) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 2 (Allende 67, Maseko 80)

Oct 22 – Dar es Salaam
TP Mazembe (Cod) 1 (Fofana 11)
Esperance (Tun) 0

Oct 22 – Uyo
Enyimba (Nga) 0
Wydad Casablanca (Mar) 1 (Jabrane 39 pen)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Oct 24 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (Kahraba 76)
Simba (Tan) 1 (Kanoute 68)
3-3 on aggregate. Al Ahly win on away goals

Oct 24 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0
Petro Atletico (Ang) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns win 2-0 on aggregate

Oct 26 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 3 (Ouahabi 45, Bouguerra 76, Tougai 86)
TP Mazembe (Cod) 0
Esperance win 3-1 on aggregate

Oct 26 – Casablanca
Wydad Casablanca (Mar) 3 (El Amloud 4, Harkass 38, Attiat Allah 43)
Enyimba (Nga) 0
Wydad Casablanca win 4-0 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Oct 29 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Maseko 52)
Al Ahly (Egy) 0

Oct 29 – Casablanca
Wydad Casablanca (Mar) 1 (Boussefiane 58)
Esperance (Tun) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Nov 1 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns win 1-0 on aggregate

Nov 1 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Rodrigues 66)
Wydad Casablanca (Mar) 0
1-1 on aggregate. Wydad win 5-4 on penalties

Finals – 1st Leg

Nov 5 – Casablanca
Wydad Casablanca (Mar) 2 (Coetzee 41 og, Serrhat 78)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Boutouil 74 pen)

Finals – 2nd Leg

Nov 12 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 2 (Shalulile 45+3, Modiba 53)
Wydad Casablanca (Mar) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns win 3-2 on aggregate

2023-24 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group Stage

Group A

Nov 24 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 1 (Lakay 54)
TP Mazembe (Cod) 0

Nov 26 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 3 (Costa 22, Shalulile 28, Sirino 74)
FC Nouadhibou (Mta) 0

Dec 2 – Lubumbashi
TP Mazembe (Cod) 1 (Likonza 60)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0

Dec 2 – Nouakchott
FC Nouadhibou (Mta) 2 (Amar 4, Oubeid 90+4)
Pyramids (Egy) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
M. Sundowns	2	1	0	1	3	1	3
TP Mazembe	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Nouadhibou	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Pyramids	2	1	0	1	1	2	3

Group B

Nov 25 – Dar es Salaam
Simba (Tan) 1 (Ntibazonkiza 44 pen)
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 1 (Pokou 77)

Nov 25 – Marrakesh
Wydad Casablanca (Mar) 0
Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) 1 (Sesinyi 33)

Dec 2 – Francistown
Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) 0
Simba (Tan) 0

Dec 2 – Abidjan
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 1 (Karamoko 72)
Wydad Casablanca (Mar) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ASEC Abidjan	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Jwaneng Galaxy	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Simba	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Wydad	2	0	0	2	0	2	0

Group C

Nov 25 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 2 (Sasse 60, Meriah 64 pen)
Etoile Sahel (Tun) 0

Nov 25 – Luanda
Petro Atletico (Ang) 1 (Miguel 37)
Al Hilal (Sud) 0

Dec 1 – Dar es Salaam
Al Hilal (Sud) 3 (Meriah 8 og, Abdelrahman 15 pen, N'Diaye 78)
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Sowe 59)

Dec 2 – Tunis
Etoile Sahel (Tun) 0
Petro Atletico (Ang) 2 (Guedes 45+4, 67)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Petro Atletico	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Al Hilal	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Esperance	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Etoile Sahel	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

Group D

Nov 24 – Algiers
Chabab Belouizdad (Alg) 3 (Benguit 10, Meziane 45+2, Jallow 90+4)
Young Africans (Tan) 0

Nov 25 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 3 (Kahraba 66, El Shahat 75, Mohsen 88)
Medeama (Gha) 0

Dec 1 – Kumasi
Medeama (Gha) 2 (Lomotey 45, Kamaradin 90+4)
Chabab Belouizdad (Alg) 1 (Benguit 39 pen)

Dec 2 – Dar es Salaam
Young Africans (Tan) 1 (Zouzoua 90+1)
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (Tau 86)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahly	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Belouizdad	2	1	0	1	4	2	3
Medeama	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
Young Africans	2	0	1	1	1	4	1

2023-24 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Group Stage

Group A

Nov 26: USM Alger (Alg) 2-0 Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby); Future FC (Egy) 1-0 SuperSport United (RSA)
Dec 3: SuperSport United (RSA) 0-2 USM Alger; (Alg) Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby) 1-2 Future FC (Egy)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
USM Alger	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Future FC	2	2	0	0	3	1	6
Al Hilal Benghazi	2	0	0	2	1	4	0
SuperSport Utd	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Group B

Nov 26: Zamalek (Egy) 1-0 Abu Salim (Lby); Sagrada Esperanca (Ang) 2-0 SOAR (Gui)
Dec 3: SOAR (Gui) 0-4 Zamalek (Egy); Abu Salim (Lby) 1-0 Sagrada Esperanca (Ang)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zamalek	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
Abu Salim	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Sagrada Esperanca	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
SOAR	2	0	0	2	0	6	0

Group C

Nov 26:
Rivers United (Nga) 3-0 Academica Lobito (Ang); Club Africain (Tun) 2-0 Dreams FC (Gha)
Dec 3:
Dreams FC (Gha) 2-1 Rivers United (Nga); Academica Lobito (Ang) 1-3 Club Africain (Tun)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Club Africain	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Dreams FC	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Rivers United	2	1	0	1	4	2	3
Academica Lobito	2	0	0	2	1	6	0

Group D

Nov 26:
RS Berkane (Mar) 2-0 Sekhukhune United (RSA); Diables Noirs (Cog) 1-3 Stade Malien (Mli)
Dec 3:
Stade Malien (Mli) 1-2 RS Berkane (Mar); Sekhukhune United (RSA) 2-1 Diables Noirs (Cog)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
RS Berkane	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Stade Malien	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Sekhukhune Utd	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Diables Noirs	2	0	0	2	2	5	0

Final Tables 2023

MALAWI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nyasa Big Bullets (C)	30	16	12	2	49	19	60
Silver Strikers	30	16	9	5	41	18	57
Mighty Wanderers	30	15	10	5	35	16	55
Chitipa United	30	14	6	10	31	29	48
Kamuzu Barracks	30	13	7	10	32	23	46
Bangwe All Stars	30	11	9	10	37	36	42
Dedza Dynamos	30	9	11	10	30	38	38
CIVO United	30	8	13	9	31	30	37
Karonga United	30	9	10	11	34	38	37
MAFCO	30	10	7	13	29	36	37
Mighty Tigers	30	8	12	10	21	22	36
Ekwendeni Hammers	30	9	9	12	26	36	36
Blue Eagles	30	8	11	11	32	32	35
Moyale Barracks (R)	30	8	11	11	32	32	35
Red Lions (R)	30	8	5	17	22	50	29
Extreme (R)	30	4	6	20	16	43	18

MOZAMBIQUE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ferroviario Beira (C)	22	11	6	5	27	18	39
Black Bulls Maputo	22	11	5	6	30	18	38
Ferroviario Nampula	22	11	3	8	24	21	36
Costa do Sol	22	10	6	6	33	22	36
Songo	22	10	5	7	28	17	35
Baia de Pemba	22	8	9	5	20	18	33
Ferroviario de Licking	22	8	8	6	20	21	32
Ferroviario Maputo	22	8	5	9	23	20	29
Vilanculo	22	7	7	8	14	17	28
Ferroviario Nacala (R)	22	7	4	11	21	32	25
Ferroviario Quelimane (R)	22	5	5	12	15	27	20
Matchedje (R)	22	1	7	14	16	40	10

REUNION

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Excelsior (C)	26	19	4	3	54	14	87
Saint-Pierroise	26	18	5	3	52	17	85
La Tamponnaise	26	17	4	5	63	18	81
Saint-Denis	26	14	7	5	50	30	75
Jeanne d'Arc	26	12	9	5	39	26	71
Trois Bassins	26	12	6	8	38	33	68
Saint-Pauloise	26	11	9	6	48	29	68
Saint-Louis	26	8	8	10	35	37	58
Sainte-Suzanne	26	8	4	14	24	39	54
Piton Saint-Leu	26	4	12	10	20	33	50
Chaudron*	26	4	6	16	21	62	44
Capricorne (R)	26	4	5	17	20	47	43
Sainte-Marienne (R)	26	4	4	18	18	65	42
OCSA Leopards (R)	26	2	7	17	17	49	39

Win = 4 points, Draw = 2 points, Loss = 1 point
**Enter the relegation play-off*

ZIMBABWE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ngezi Platinum (C)	34	20	6	8	45	23	66
Manica Diamonds	34	16	10	8	42	23	58
Dynamos	34	15	12	7	37	16	57
Platinum	34	15	10	9	37	29	55
Highlanders	34	14	13	7	24	22	55
Herentals	34	14	9	11	38	33	51
Chicken Inn	34	11	16	7	35	26	49
CAPS United	34	11	13	10	37	32	46
Hwange	34	12	9	13	27	27	45
Green Fuel	34	11	10	13	27	34	43
Kariba	34	11	8	15	27	48	41
Simba Bhora	34	9	13	12	29	27	40
Bulawayo Chiefs	34	10	10	14	37	39	40
Yadah	34	12	4	18	35	46	40
Black Rhinos (R)	34	9	11	14	27	37	38
Triangle United (R)	34	6	17	11	24	36	35
Sheasham (R)	34	7	14	13	23	36	35
Cranborne Bullets (R)	34	6	9	19	16	33	27

OCEANIA

Final Tables 2023

NEW CALEDONIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Magenta (C)	22	14	5	3	54	26	69
Gaica	22	15	2	5	45	27	69
Hienghene Sport	22	11	6	5	43	37	61
Tiga Sport	22	11	4	7	46	24	59
Lossi	22	9	4	9	33	31	53
Ne Drehu	22	8	4	10	32	39	50
AS Mont-Dore	22	7	6	9	31	32	49
Horizon Patho*	22	7	8	7	40	45	49
Kunie	22	6	7	9	34	30	47
Wetr	22	6	5	11	23	38	45
Dumbea**	22	6	2	14	24	49	42
Qanono (R)	22	3	5	14	22	49	36

Win = 4 points, Draw = 2 points, Loss = 1 point
**Deducted 2 points*
***Enter the relegation play-off*

NEW ZEALAND

Northern League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Auckland City*	22	19	3	0	64	9	60
Eastern Suburbs*	22	17	5	0	51	17	56
Auckland United*	22	13	4	5	50	24	43
Manurewa*	22	11	3	8	46	37	36
Western Springs	22	10	3	9	39	35	33
Hamilton Wanderers	22	8	6	8	39	49	30
West Coast Rangers	22	8	2	12	33	49	26
Birkenhead United	22	7	4	11	46	44	25
Melville United	22	6	5	11	30	47	23
Bay Olympic	22	4	3	15	33	55	15
Takapuna (R)	22	4	3	15	23	50	15
Manukau United (R)	22	3	3	16	26	64	12

**Advance to National League championship round*

Central League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wellington Olympic*	18	15	1	2	79	29	46
Wellington Phoenix Reserves*	18	12	1	5	47	29	37
Napier City Rovers*	18	10	3	5	50	32	33
Petone*	18	10	2	6	45	33	32
Western Suburbs	18	8	4	6	40	34	28
Waterside Karori	18	7	3	8	44	40	24
Miramar	18	8	0	10	37	43	24
Stop Out	18	7	3	8	37	47	24
North Wellington	18	2	1	15	21	63	7
Whanganui Athletic (R)	18	1	2	15	19	69	5

**Advance to National League championship round*

Southern League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Christchurch United*	18	16	1	1	72	12	49
Cashmere Technical*	18	13	3	2	66	27	42
Coastal Spirit	18	10	1	7	30	36	31
Dunedin City Royals	18	8	5	5	44	29	29
Ferrymead Bays	18	9	2	7	35	36	29
Nelson Suburbs	18	7	4	7	48	46	25
Nomads United	18	7	2	9	32	35	23
Green Island	18	5	1	12	33	58	16
Selwyn United	18	3	1	14	21	53	10
Twenty 11 (R)	18	2	0	16	11	60	6

**Advance to National League championship round*

National League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Auckland City*	8	7	0	1	17	9	21
Wellington Olympic*	8	6	2	0	30	13	20
Cashmere Technical	8	4	1	3	23	19	13
Christchurch United	8	4	1	3	15	14	13
Eastern Suburbs	8	3	3	2	18	10	12
Manurewa	8	3	1	4	14	19	10
Auckland United	8	2	3	3	12	14	9
Wellington Phoenix Reserves	8	3	0	5	17	20	9
Napier City Rovers	8	2	0	6	10	23	6
Petone	8	0	1	7	5	20	1

**Advance to the Grand Final*

Grand Final

Nov 26: Wellington Olympic 2-0 Auckland City

January 2024 *Vol. 64 No.5*

GROUP EDITOR
Stephen Fishlock

ASSISTANT EDITORS
Jamie Evans & Jared Tinslay

DESIGN
Sean Phillips, atg-media.com

PICTURES
Pictures copyright: Getty Images

SPECIAL THANKS THIS ISSUE TO:
Keir Radnedge, Mark Gleeson, John Duerden, Steve Menary & Alamy

EDITORIAL
Kelsey Media, The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill, Yalding, Maidstone, Kent, ME18 6AL

ADVERTISING AND SPONSORSHIP
Talk Media Ltd: Russell Bedford
Tel. 01732 445328
Email: russell@talk-media.uk

AD PRODUCTION MANAGER
Talk Media Ltd: Nick Bond
Tel. 01732 445325
Email: nick@talk-media.uk

PUBLISHER Steve Brown
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER Phil Weeden
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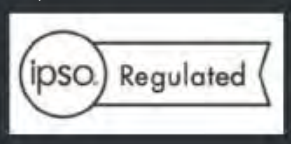

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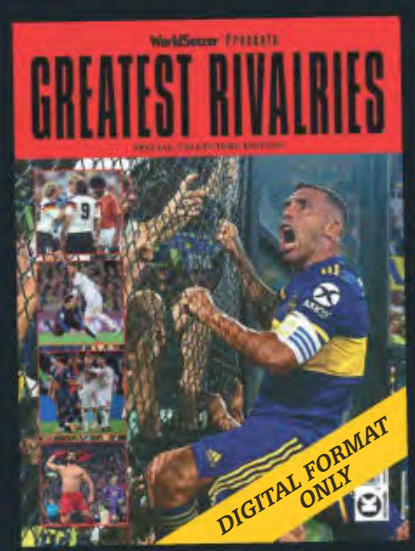

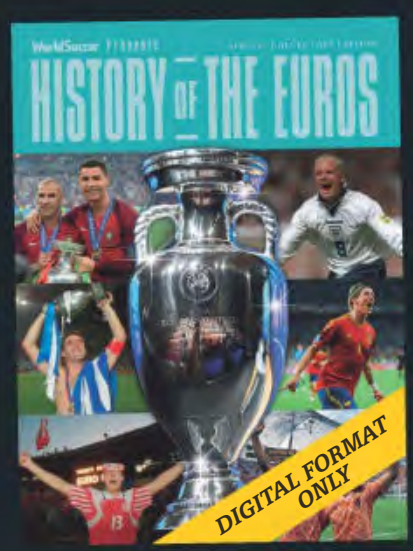

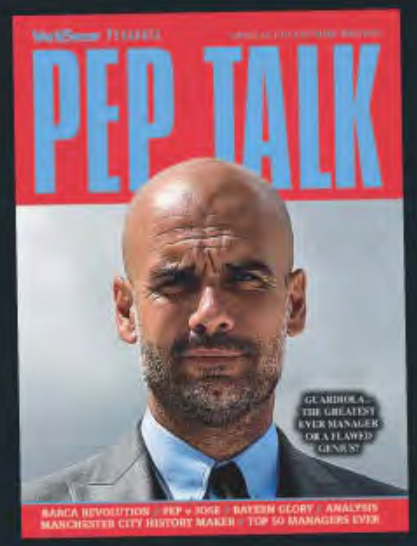

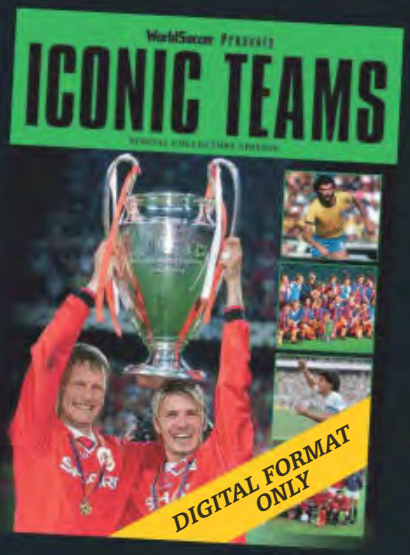

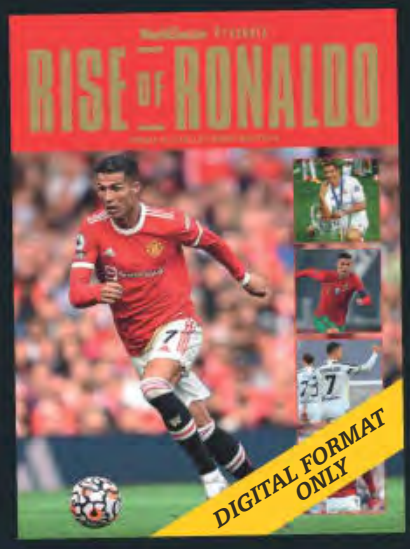

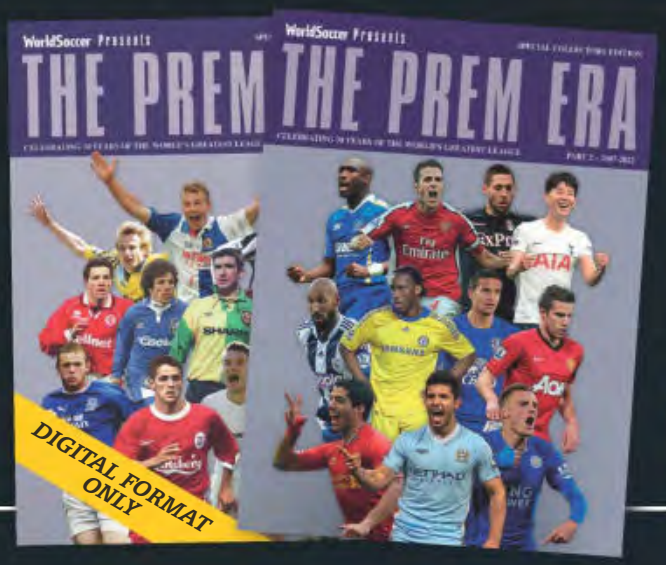

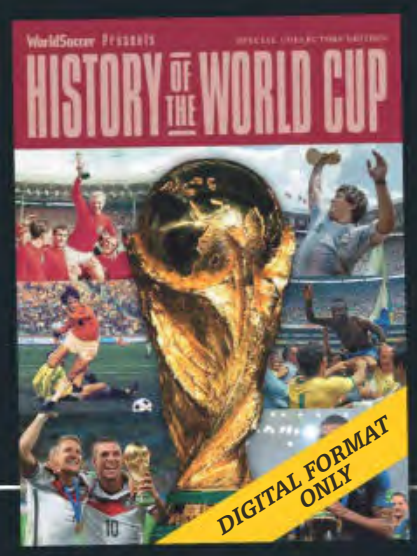

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